Of Black and Gold: the Gathering Storm
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/58964230.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warnings:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Categories:
F/M, M/M

Fandom:
Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Relationships:
Regulus Black/James Potter, Regulus Black/Original Female Character(s)

Characters:
Regulus Black, Sirius Black, James Sirius Potter, Evan Rosier, Barty Crouch Jr., Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, Narcissa Black Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Black Lestrange, Orion Black, Walburga Black, Alphard Black, Cygnus Black III | Walburga Black's Brother, Lily Evans Potter, Euphemia Potter, Fleamont Potter

Additional Tags:
Black Family-centric (Harry Potter), Regulus Black-centric, Marauders Era (Harry Potter), First Wizarding War with Voldemort (Harry Potter), Black Family Drama (Harry Potter), Angst, Fluff and Angst, Fluff and Humor, Regulus Black Needs a Hug

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Of Black & Gold

Stats:
Published: 2024-09-15 Completed: 2024-11-12 Words: 165,953 Chapters: 26/26

Of Black and Gold: the Gathering Storm

by AzuliaStar

Summary

"Storms do not break without warning — first comes the shift in the air, the tension in the silence, the gathering of something inevitable."

With dark forces rising, a Professor recruiting for the revolution and a brother potentially vacating the Black throne, Regulus finds himself navigating shifting loyalties, dangerous secrets, demons from the past and an unexpected attraction. Will he follow the path laid out for him — or forge his own?

*

”Morning, Black,” Potter greeted, his smirk as mischievous as ever. He leaned in, his eyes sparkling. “I got enough of a lecture from McGonagall already about my ‘relaxed attire,’ so if you’re thinking of chiding me, you’re out of luck.” He bit his lip in that maddening way that made Regulus momentarily forget how to speak.

Regulus cleared his throat, keeping his expression neutral. “Obviously.”

Potter’s eyes glinted with amusement as he leaned in again, whispering, “But I take it you like my ‘relaxed attire,’ don’t you? Or is the hungry look just because you’ve missed breakfast?”

Regulus wasn’t sure whether to laugh or punch Potter in the face.

"I haven't had breakfast yet.

Notes

Hello there, everyone!

I am re-entering the world of fanfiction after almost a decade. After having read all the HP books, the character of Regulus Black and the Marauder era in general just gripped me, and I had to work it out on paper. Now, a couple of notes before we commence:
1) I've rated this fic 'explicit' because it deals with all stuff in an

explicit way; think about physical/emotional/sexual abuse, graphic violence, sexual relations and so on. Still, I'd like to underscore that it isn't all angst and despair - there's loads of humor, hope and love as well!
2) Now, this is a Regulus POV and there will be Jegulus in it (although it's a slow-burn). I've tried to make it as canon as possible but, as I think that the Jegulus pairing is rather unlikely, it will not be canon-compliant completely. I do try to make it as realistic as possible and it is canon-compliant where it doesn't get in the way of the storyline.
3) I'd like you to keep in mind that I am no native English speaker (nor have I ever lived in a country in which English is the main language), and it'll probably show in my writing. I'm very open to (constructive) feedback, so don't be shy.

Lastly: this first chapter is dark - darker than most of the story. I do advise you to read at least two/three chapters to get the main feeling of the story, but that's up to you, of course.

So, as for this chapter, the warnings go: graphic and detailed (!) depictions of violence and blood.

Chapter 1: Prologue

As dusk settled over the enormous estate comprising Black Manor, large shadows were casted through the room that housed the library. It was a magnificent room, shelves filled with leather-bound books in all colours and sizes towering over the oval space, leaving only several patches of wall to showcase the majestic tapestries which colours matched the ambiance of the room. It smelled of grandeur.

As no candles were lit, and no fireplace was crackling, it would take an outsider a moment or two to spot the silhouette of a boy sitting at a large, mahogany desk, bent over a piece of parchment. A slow breeze drifted to the crack of one of the mullioned windows, motioning the chandelier's crystal prisms to a soft, ominous song.

Neither the deepening twilight, nor the growing chill in the room seemed to bother the boy, who'd sat motionless for quite some time, taking in the words across the parchment he held so fervently it was a miracle not to have teared in his clutch. The elegant, feminine longhand across the parchment read:

Dear Reggie,

The task has been completed.

As anticipated, it took some time to locate him, after which they had to breach several protective enchantments, but they succeeded – and quite thoroughly so.
Since, understandably, you wished not to be present, I have enclosed some pictures documenting the fate that has befallen the monster. The pictures are gruesome, exactly what he deserved, but I have wrapped them in case you choose not to see. I want to take this opportunity to emphasise, once again, that you've been tremendously brave throughout the whole ordeal. The fact that they caught him and massacred him, again shows that in all cases, Reggie, as long as we stand together, united in strength and determination, justice will be served. For you now the time has come to let go of your past demons and find the peace that you so richly deserve.

I will come over to stay at Black Manor in approximately two weeks, so thankfully, we will see much of each other this summer! I can't wait to see you and hear all about your recent months at Hogwarts and everything you have been up to.

I will see you soon,

Your all-time favourite cousin,

Cissy.

For a long time, but also no time at all, the boy would stroke the wrapped pictures, sliding from hand to hand, not sure whether to unwrap them or not. For so long, he had wanted this. Wanted, as his cousin had put, justice to be served. He had longed for this moment- not a minute longer would he live in a world where the beast lived. Not a minute would the monster breathe while he breathed. Years and years, though it felt like eternity, he had waited for this moment, wondering what it would feel like.

Well, it was rather anticlimactic, to be honest.

It was as if nothing had changed. Just another sunny day at the manor in the English countryside, soon to be filled with relatives and boring luncheons, politics over the dinner table and forced conversations in the drawing room.

The current room always proved a suitable hide-out, a way out of the long conversations that often seemed to go into circles, to them always the same gist – the world had become mad and finally we were at the brink of change, of revolution. It was a getaway from the endless bickering between his relatives. It was a perfect hiding spot for the feelings of shame, the knowledge of being just not got enough that he could never entirely get rid of, that would always chase him but somehow seemed to be partially muted by the grotesque, private room filled with books, the amount of which reflected all the thoughts, feelings and memories he tried to escape from, but never quite could.

He sighed and in the spur of the moment his curiosity got the better of him. He was once again reminded why he was content to normally be a very prudent, contemplative person. He unwrapped the two moving pictures, on which a quick glance was enough to have his stomach turning. A second glance had him retching. A third had him vomiting supper all over the hardwood floor.

He should have known that they'd be horrible. He was warned, after all. *Gruesome* , his cousin had described - and, considering the family they were born into, the bar lay quite high. Still, gruesome didn't do justice to the brutality snapped in the moving picture – it was

repulsive, it was macabre, *abhorrent.*

Afraid to have his partially digested lunch surge out of his stomach as well, he chose not to peek a fourth time. Besides, there'd be no need for that, since the scene was engraved on his brain.

The picture was full of blood, which colour stood in stark contrast to the white flour, walls and ceiling just barely visible around the pools of gore. In the middle, there was a man, hanging upside down by his ankles, dangling like a butchered animal. The boy knew the man very well - there was probably not a single patch of skin or repulsive thought that he hadn't shared, clawing at him in the deep, suffocating dark. The realisation that despite this the boy only vaguely recognised the man, made him possibly even sicker. The man's skin was marked by fresh magical lashes, the level of monstrosity nothing compared to the fact that his hair was literally cut off his skull, leaving the sight of brains sliding out of the skull's opening. It was the eyes that stood out in the man's face, the look of unparalleled, incomprehensible terror in them. The boy was sure that they were left open on purpose.

Instinctively, the boy knew which part of the picture to lay his eyes on last.

In the middle, between his legs, nothing but blood where his crotch should have been.

The picture was so appalling that it made the world spin and the heart throb in a dangerous, sick rhythm. Deep down, the boy considered the apparent effects of the scene a blessing - for going back to that snapshot would arouse such a strong level of repugnance that it wouldn't just overshadow, but completely smother any other sentiments, like that of guilt or, perhaps, even pity. Well, for a while, at least.

Chapter 2: Of Muggles & Manchester

Chapter Notes

Warnings: references to and depictions of violence and abuse.

There were many estates running in the Noble and most Ancient House of Black, but not one better advertised the family's ideals and values than Black Manor. The land itself comprised thousands of acres, neatly trimmed hedges forming parterres used as mazes in many childhood games, different terraces spread over the grassy plains and a big lake bordered by weeping willows. The majority of the estate was edged with a large forest housing many magical creatures – one of the reasons why Regulus tried to avoid setting foot near it at all costs. Another being his uncle, who normally spent a considerable large part of the day at the stables located at the forest's border.

The manor's interior too was all grandeur and wealth. A magnificent entrance hall filled with fireplaces only connected to the most important and wealthy people's floos, a drawing room elegant enough the impress even the Minister of Magic herself (although, according to many hallway whispers, it would not take much), a large kitchen in which several house-elves slaved throughout the day and a dining room and morning room where one was expected at least thrice between sunrise and sunset. The house's other levels accommodated the many bed and guest rooms, the oval library and adjacent a study.

It was all rather grandiose, exorbitant and aristocratic - it really did match its owner, Uncle Alphard.

Regulus could never get past the irony that for such an enormous estate, he found himself too often in company of people he did not particularly like. What was the point of so big a manor with so many hideaways if you couldn't even avoid the people you disliked?

It was in such company that Regulus found himself sitting stiffly at the dining table on a late-summer day in August. It was what Mother always called the "close circle", referring to a gathering of only Regulus's parents and brother, his uncle Alphard and his other uncle, Cygnus with his wife Druella and daughters Bellatrix and Narcissa. The fact that this "close circle" accompanied nothing but bickering, tension and aversion opposed to what the name suggested, was another irony that Regulus did not fail to notice.

Black Manor was officially owned by Regulus's uncle Alphard. He was older than his brother Cygnus and although he was younger that Regulus's mother, Walburga, traditional wizard inheritance law designated the eldest male as the heir to all the family's property and wealth – boiling over which had become Walburga's raison d'être, according to Regulus's brother, Sirius.

It was since long clear that Alphard would not provide an heir. Although he had always been incredibly handsome and wealthy and would probably find a willing spouse with the flick of a finger, the fact that he was gay really threw a spanner in the works. Not that anybody would say this aloud – it was a very sensitive subject in even the most progressive circles, to which the Noble family of Black certainly did not belong. Normally, men would still marry a suitable female, but have a man (or more) on the side. Uncle Alphard was a bit of a rebel, apparently.

Seeing that Uncle Cygnus only had daughters, the heritage of the Black family all fell on Sirius, eluding which had become Sirius's raison d'être, according to Regulus.

While Regulus was silently scraping down his bowl of soup, making sure to do it secretly and silently as per dining etiquette, it was Narcissa that broke the silence.

"Lucius said it's been very hectic at the Ministry," she said conversationally. "How is your department holding up, Uncle Orion?"

Regulus's father nodded indifferently. In essence, Orion was a handsome man in his fifties; broad shoulders, the posture of someone important, short brown hair and brown eyes. However, although his features were neat and well-groomed, he had the appearance of someone who, quite frankly, did not give a fig about anything - to the degree that if someone were to drop dead in front of him, he probably wouldn't bat an eye. Unfortunately for Cissy, it also made him an awful conversationalist.

"Yes, yes," he waved his hand, "all the departments are swamped. Nothing new, really."

"Has Rodolphus also been working late?" Cissy continued her smalltalk, now directed at her sister, Bellatrix.

It was obvious in the high cheekbones and elegant, slim posture that Bellatrix and Narcissa were sisters, but that's where the similarity ended. Narcissa was light in colour and appearance; long, blond hair,

blue eyes, her full lips often cracked in a kind smile. Bellatrix had the same lips, but they were generally shaped in a vicious smirk. Cissy was kind and soft, Bellatrix cold and cruel. Her gaze was enough to send cold shivers down Regulus's spine. Unboxing the many memories of Bellatrix playing with him as a child was enough to make him shudder outrightly.

"Yes. Too much time is being wasted on trivial matters." She shot Sirius a sharp look. Regulus felt his brother stiffen. "Thankfully it'll be only a matter of time before the Ministry will feel forced to … reprioritise."

"Anyhow," said Druella, seemingly uninterested by the current topic of conversation, "what are you girl up to tomorrow?"

"I will be in Scotland, Mother," answered Cissy, "With Lucius. I plan on returning on Friday."

"I will also be busy, I have plans with some old friends."

The idea of Bellatrix having friends, hell, having friendships over the span of years, made Regulus's brows arch. Sirius snorted which made him choke in his hot soup - he must've thought the same. Bellatrix was about to retort something undoubtedly nasty, but was cut short by Uncle Alphard.

"Ah, well, that leaves us, chaps," he clapped his hands enthusiastically, looking from Sirius to Regulus and back. "Now, who is joining me for a ride tomorrow?"

By a "ride", Uncle Alphard meant riding one of his ridiculously expensive and, Regulus was sure, potentially homicidal winged horses. The last time he was cornered by his uncle, he had set the record of falling off Alphard's beloved horse, Lord Prance, five times in less than an hour. His Uncle had made a big show out of mimicking his gracious crashes to the ground to Sirius during supper, until both of them had been roaring with laughter and Regulus had simply left the table after it just went on. He had thanked Merlin that no one else was there.

"I'm sure Reggie would be *delighted*, Uncle Alphard," said Sirius with a smirk.

"Yes, you love riding, right?" added Aunt Druella kindly and she was - alarmingly so - serious.

"*No*," Regulus said. A little bit too sharply, he realised once he saw Bella's smirk and his mother's frown. "Err - I have… plans."

"*You* have plans?" Bellatrix incredulously. "With whom? The library?"

"Now, now, dear," said Druella. "I am sure Regulus has many friends."

This was not, in fact, true, but it gave Regulus an idea. "*Yes*," he said, again a tad too enthusiastically. This fact didn't go past Bellatrix and Sirius. "I'm meeting Isa."

He was not, though. Regulus knew that she was spending the week with her cousins from France.

"Who?" asked Uncle Alphard.

"Oh, that'd be Isadora Nott," clarified Bellatrix. "Regulus's … *girlfriend*."

"She's not my girlfriend," Regulus said sharply. He was getting tired of clarifying this any time her name came up. The fact that he felt his cheeks burning up unfortunately did not really help his case.

"Well, if you're off to your girlfriend-"

"Again, *not* my girlfriend-"

"-that leaves you and me, Sirius," Uncle Alphard said. He rubbed his hands joyfully.

Regulus heard Sirius groan. Contrary to Regulus, Sirius was a very talented rider, which somehow always resulted in his uncle and him riding together for hours - and Sirius loathed every minute of it. He generally loathed being around his family, around the people that reminded him all too much of who he was and what he was designated to do.

However, since Mother had forbidden Sirius to spend time with his friends, Sirius didn't have a viable excuse to get out of Uncle Alphard's plans.

"Ah yes," he said unenthusiastically, "that indeed leaves us." He looked at Regulus. "So tell me, Reg, where is spending dear Isadora the holidays, again?"

Leave it to Sirius to try to sabotage him. “Er-” Regulus answered stiffly, “she’s at the estate near Manchester.”

“Liar,” his brother hissed.

“Please tell Lord Prance I said hi, okay?” Regulus whispered victoriously.

To be honest, Regulus was glad that it wasn’t him riding on the back of Lord Prance or Mr. Houdini with his Uncle - not just because he truly realised he had been lucky no one else has been there to witness his Uncle’s glorious show and was sure that this time some other relative would be present leading to taking them the piss out of him for the remainder of his life, he also knew Uncle Alphard was one of the only remaining potential bridges between his brother and their family. Well, apart from me, Regulus thought.

“Well, that’s settled then,” Mother said coldly. Regulus had no doubt that Mother had had the same train of thought. “You will be joining your Uncle tomorrow.”

Considering the combination of people at the table, Regulus was surprised that they managed to almost get through the main course before shit hit the van.

Regulus was just finishing his last bite of asparagus when Uncle Cygnus started discussing an open letter in that day’s issue of the Prophet. Apparently, a group of ‘reformist’ wizards and witches had made a case for mixed marriage due to the declining birth rate. Regulus read the paper daily – although not necessarily from cover to cover - but had missed this particular piece since it was printed somewhere at the end of the issue, after the Society Reporting and before the advertisements. In the current climate, it would probably not have been published at all, were it not for the several important names that had signed the piece.

“I’m glad that we have no business at Hogwarts anymore,” sighed Druella relieved, “I wouldn’t feel so confident about sending my children there, with Dumbledore openly supporting such an appalling case.”

“It is not surprising though,” Narcissa chipped in. “The rate of Muggleborns and half-bloods attending Hogwarts has been rising for years. Even among Slytherins, the number is staggering, or so I have heard.” She looked at Regulus and Sirius, the only two still attending the school, as if asking whether the gossip she had heard somewhere

was, in fact, true.

Regulus shifted uncomfortably in his chair, hoping the conversation would turn into a different direction. Mother had lately been playing with the idea of sending him and Sirius to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts - an idea both Regulus and Sirius dreaded. It wouldn't be wise to feed this idea.

Bellatrix eagerly entered the conversation, her gaze not breaking away from Sirius's face for a second. "The number of which was already staggering among the more…," she paused, " *traitorous* houses, I am sure. I wonder what it feels like, being stuck with the scum of society. The low of the low. Can they even keep up with classes? Cast a simple summoning spell?"

"You'd be surprised," Sirius retorted, a sarcastic smile across his face. "But don't fret about them too much, Bells, you wouldn't want to stress your few brain cells out." He turned his head to cast a meaningful look at the people around the table. "Being inbred does rather put a damper on the intellect, doesn't it?"

"Sirius!" screeched Mother at once. Her gaze was murderous, her voice cutting and cold. "Don't you *dare* . Upstairs - NOW!"

"It is fine, Aunt Walburga," Bella said, clearly enjoying the sudden turn of events. "Tell me, Sirius, how does it feel knowing your Mudblood and blood traitor friends will be the first to go once the revolution starts? Isn't Fleamont Potter one of the signatories? I'm sure he will be the first to croak - oh well, after Dumbledore, I guess."

"Now, now," Uncle Alphard chipped in, very cheerfully, in stark contrast with the tense atmosphere. "Let's not count the dragons before they hatch. There is probably still a long way to go before the - err - revolution starts."

"They're talking about months, weeks, perhaps," Bellatrix corrected him.

"Is saying who? How would we know?" asked Regulus interestedly. He normally refrained from entering the inevitable political discussions around the dining table, especially when they included Sirius and Bellatrix, which might have been the reason behind the surprised looks he was getting from his relatives.

"Well, Rodolphus said-"

“Ah!” exclaimed Sirius. “*Rodolphus* said. Our beloved expert. I’m sure he must be devastated to get rid of all the Muggleborns, though. It really does reduce the pool to fish in - I’ve heard he prefers them blonde and *Mudbloody* -”

It was a very stupid move for Sirius to blurt out a reference to the many rumours about Bellatrix's husband fooling around with other women and especially, Muggleborns.

Complete chaos broke out. In a split second, Bellatrix had jumped from her seat and pointed her wand at Sirius. Sirius, no stranger to the quick draw of his cousin, quickly ducked the spell thrown at him and drew his wand as well. The spell hit the wall behind him, leaving an ugly hole in the wall. Before Sirius could react, though, Mother cast a shielding charm between his son and niece.

Bellatrix’s dark eyes were shooting daggers at both Mother and Sirius. Druella shrieked and Narcissa gazed at the scene equally shocked, with her hand clapped in front of her mouth. Unsurprisingly, Father as well as Uncle Cygnus looked at the scene apathetically, simply letting out a sigh of exasperation. Uncle Alphard looked perfectly at ease, his hands folded in anticipation, as if he was waiting for a show about to unfold before him.

Mother, however, looked like she was about to kill someone, eyes squeezed in thin lines, face blood-drained, the wand in her hand trembling slightly.

“To. Your. Room,” Mother hissed in a dangerous voice. “Don’t you *dare* talk to your cousin that way, you ungrateful, vulgar swine. And you–” she turned to Bellatrix “--next time, leave him to me. I do not wish to become part of your collateral damage.”

“Yes, I’d rather have you two have a go at each other in the morning room, I’m not half as fond of the wallpaper there,” Uncle Alphard said cheerfully.

“You will wait in your room for me. And no outings for you - don’t you *dare* leave your room any time the rest of the week.” And with a flick of her wand, she lifted the shielding charm and with another, Sirius got yanked out of the chair. He got the message and stomped out of the room, all the time cursing under his breath.

Uncle Alphard let out a sigh. “With all the magic in the world,” he said, face split in a content smile, “and still… the three of them together, that’s *real* magic, don’t you agree?”

*****

Later that night, Regulus silently tiptoed to the bedroom adjacent to his, a cup of hot tea in his hand. He had gotten used to the endless fights between his brother and their relatives, but this was the first time in weeks things had escalated so badly.

Ever since he was little, it was custom for Regulus to spend the summer holidays at one of the family's mansions with his cousins and brother. For years, that had been Seacliff Hall, but they had relocated to Black Manor the year before Regulus started Hogwarts. When they were little, days consisted of playing hide and seek or kick the gnome, going to the beach, playing dress-up forced by Cissy and Bellatrix and playing their own silly version of Quidditch on their children's broomsticks. This had changed, though. Bellatrix was married now, meaning she'd pop by for dinner now and then but she'd been away the majority of summer. Regulus didn't mind - he'd always felt at best uneasy around her, having experienced the vicious, cunning side of her personally throughout the years. It was different with Cissy. She was kind and interested, always a great source of support. Cissy was engaged now to Lucius Malfoy, which entailed that also she was around a lot less. She'd stay over for a couple of days when Lucius was busy at work, but most days it was just Regulus and Sirius.

"Sirius?" Regulus whispered, knocking softly on the door. He heard a muffled grunt at the other side and slowly entered the room.

He was lying on his stomach on his bed in pyjama buttons, face pressed into a pillow.

When he took a closer look at his back, Regulus's heart skipped a beat. He winced. Sirius's back was covered in gauze but apparently not enough, since the blood was still seeping through. Regulus moved closer tentatively, placing the cup of tea on the nightstand.

"You okay?" he asked cautiously.

Sirius snorted and retorted in a weak voice. "What does it look like, Reg?"

"Why rise to the bait?" Regulus started, but before he could continue, Sirius cut him short.

“Please spare me the lecture, brother,” he spat, his face slightly raised from the pillow to be able to talk. It would’ve come across more hostile if it were not for the fact that his face was paler than ever and his puffy eyes betrayed that he’d been crying. His brother rarely cried. A wave of pity went through Regulus.

He sighed and drew his wand, about to cast a spell to stop the bleeding.

Sirius looked at him warily. “You sure, Reg? Wouldn't want Mother to find out you’ve been aiding your traitor of a brother.”

This was true - punishing Sirius was often just as much as a test for Regulus as it was for Sirius.

“So I won’t heal them completely,” offered Regulus. “I’ll make the bleeding stop and numb the wounds.”

Sirius nodded and dropped his head back in his pillow. Regulus first cast a stanching spell, quickly followed by a cleaning and a numbing spell. It worked instantly, after which Sirius slowly sat up. It wasn’t very difficult magic, but quite impressive for a fourteen year old. As soon as they both had their wands and some magical experience under their belt, they had made it a point to learn the basics of healing. It was testament to the environment they were growing up in.

“Ah, way better,” Sirius sighed. “Could’ve tried it myself, but it’s a strange angle…”

Regulus nodded. Also, healing spells were always better casted by someone that could assess the damage well, to adjust the magic to the severity of the wound.

“Funniest thing I heard, by the way,” Sirius said with an attempted smug smirk. It did not quite reach his eyes.

Regulus raised his eyebrows. “... that’d be?”

“Apparently dear Isadora Nott is not in Manchester, but in London with her cousins from Nice.”

“How do *you* know about Isa’s whereabouts?”

“Well, apparently, one of her cousins is friends with James’s neighbour.”

“And this piece of information has reached you, how, exactly?”

Sirius’s eyes flickered to a little mirror on the floor. Ah, Regulus thought, of course.

“Does it make a difference? You knew I was lying.”

“True, but I could… accidentally slip something to dear old Alph,” Sirius threatened smugly.

“Why? So you can make me miserable, me - who’s just healed your wounds?”

“Healed is a big word, brother, you’ve just stanched and numbed them. But-” he quickly said before Regulus could argue, “-I have a preposition.”

“And that would be?”

“Go to Manchester with me. Muggle Manchester, of course.”

“*Why* in Merlin’s name would I go to Muggle Manchester?”

“Because I’m bored out of my mind!”

“You’ve literally just gotten - what - ten lashes-”

“-fifteen, actually. One for every year of my existence.”

Regulus winced at that reality. Punishment, and corporal punishment specifically, was no rarity in the Black household. When he was little, it was the small things that antagonised Mother. Muddy shoes, wetting the bed, breaking a glass, it could all infuriate Mother the one day and be ignored the other. Perhaps the hardest part was not to refrain from dropping a glass, to take off dirty clothes before entering the house or make the bathroom on time at night, but not knowing whether today was a good day or a bad day - the uncertainty was the most distressing part of it all.

Over the years, Regulus had learnt how to behave, how to sit still and upright at the table, how to avoid the gaze of his Mother and make himself unseen. Now he had gotten older, it was the big things that mattered - grades, behaviour at important events, the people he hung out with, reports from his Head of House, Slughorn. Also, now it mattered all the time - there were no good or bad days anymore. At least it had become more predictable, Regulus thought wryly.

Still, perhaps chances of getting punished were slimmer, the nature of the punishment had become all the more brutal - the most brutal so far being the 0ne Sirius had been subjected to tonight. Magical lashes. Mother had two types - the silent ones and the ones with the cracking sound of the whip. Regulus preferred the latter, since then he could at least prepare himself for the agony about to be inflicted.

"All the more reason to you know, keep your head down."

"I really can't stand to be locked up another day."

"Just learn to control yourself for once."

"How can you side with these bigoted, vile -"

"Look, Sirius, it's not about agreeing with whomever, you *know* Bellatrix would do anything to provoke you, especially in front of Mother--"

"Yeah, yeah, let's not start that discussion again, shall we? Look, it's only us and Uncle Alph tomorrow and the old bastard will be out riding most of the day, no one will know we're gone. Besides, you *told* them you'd go to Manchester, so if anything, you have a cover. No one will check on me, I am sure, so no one will know."

Regulus sighed.

"Besides," Sirius continued, "I'm sure you have some Muggle shopping to do. It will be your last chance for ages."

*****

Thus, the next day, Regulus found himself in the heart of Manchester, dropped off by the Knight Bus. They were standing in a side street of one of the city's vibrant shopping streets, taking off their summer cloaks. They were dressed in Muggle clothes, something that made Regulus very uncomfortable and made Sirius seemingly feel very cool. Sirius was proudly showing off the leather boots that he hadn't been able to wear all summer (apparently they were Dr. Martens, which Sirius had stressed at least ten times) while Regulus uncomfortably readjusted the jeans that were, in his opinion, way too tight even though they were Sirius's.

"Well, off we go," Sirius said enthusiastically, steering toward the main street.

It was a surreal experience, roaming the streets of Muggle Manchester with Sirius. Despite his upbringing, Regulus had quite some experience in visiting Muggle cities, albeit with a clear direction in mind; he'd go into a bookstore, buy what he wanted, and get back to the safe domain of the wizarding world. It was a whole different experience with Sirius who clearly had no plan and just wanted to roam the streets aimlessly. They made their way to the bookstore, Sherratt & Hughes, which took them quite some time since Sirius was distracted by nearly everything.

"Wow," he said, gaping at the sight of a Muggle girl on a motorcycle. She noticed it as well, smirking at him and throwing him a cheeky wink. Sirius answered with a whistle and a smug smile.

Great - risking lashes to gawk at motorcycles and Muggle girls.

Regulus rolled his eyes and quickly resumed his way to the bookstore, feeling the familiar jolt of excitement once in front of the shop's weather glass windows. Some Muggle books were showcased in the shop window - Regulus recognised the novelists Stephen King and John Irving, although he had never read any of their works. Regulus wasn't interested in useless Muggle novels or fairy tales, he was interested in ideas, philosophy, *knowledge.*

So, he quickly proceeded to the philosophy aisle which was, unshockingly, at the back of the store. It made no sense for the most important and interesting works to be hidden in the back, but it came with the advantage of being in the less crowded area of the bookstore. It was the same with every Muggle bookstore he'd ever set foot in - the majority of them in London; almost the entire store, and certainly the shop's front and shop windows hijacked by stupid novels and self-help books, whereas the treasures were neglected, collecting dust in the faraway corner of the store.

The store was nice, though, exactly what you'd expect of a Muggle bookstore; dark wood shelves, clearly worn from years of use, wooden floorboards occasionally covered by a rug, several bookstands promoting certain authors or works. It had that familiar smell of wood, dust and Muggle paper. Regulus loved it and eagerly grabbed some books from the shelf, reading their backs and stacking the most important ones.

"So, still obsessed with the Muggle… opii, then?"

Regulus shot Sirius an annoyed look. "That'd be *opuses* or *opera*,"

correcting his brother's poor Latin grammar, "and no, I'm not obsessed. There's some good works among Muggle philosophers that are actually quite relevant to the wizarding world."

"Don't let Mother hear you debating intertwinement between Muggle folk and wizards, let alone the wizarding world benefiting from them," Sirius grinned.

"It's better than the garbage you've laid your hands on," Regulus said, shooting the detectives by Agatha Christie in his hand a dirty look.

"Ah, but these are great," his brother said cheerfully, "would you rather have me read some Jane Austen?"

Regulus snorted. "As if you haven't read all that bollocks already."

After some time, they made their way towards a little coffee shop. It was crammed between two big compartment stores, almost invisible and almost deserted, barring a small group of girls. Sirius had been nagging about going to a bar for two hours, a place Regulus was definitely not planning on setting foot inside, so they compromised and went for coffee instead. They had chosen the clearly very unpopular shop deliberately, feeling chances of running into acquaintances would be very slim here. It still felt as a great concession on Regulus's part, as he'd already been forced to awkwardly hover in a record store for almost an hour, listening to Sirius rant on about some Bowie and a Beatle.

They both ordered coffee at the counter and went to pay at the cash register. Sirius extracted some Muggle money from his pocket, clearly struggling with all the different coins. The bloke behind the counter shot them a confused look. Regulus pushed Sirius aside, extracted some money from his pockets and paid for the drinks, quickly walking to a table and sitting down.

"Aren't *you* the one taking Muggle Studies? How hard can it be, really?" Regulus hissed to Sirius as he sat down.

"I just keep mixing them up," he said indifferently, "and you know I've only taken on Muggle Studies to piss off Mother."

This was true - Sirius didn't seem very interested in the Muggle world, apart from the weird music and chances to woo the girls with Muggle heritage in his House. Sirius had been pushing his brother to take the subject as well, but Regulus was confident that the mere thought of both her sons disgracing the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

in that way would beyond a doubt result in Mother's premature death. Which was, Sirius had said, exactly the point.

Still, Regulus was fascinated by some aspects of the Muggle world, and since it was very hard to get your hands on any useful information about them in the Black household or Slytherin milieu, it was rather convenient Sirius had taken on the subject. Mother naturally refused to order his course books, and as Sirius's purchases at Flourish and Blotts were monitored by the family's accountant, Regulus and Sirius had struck a deal. Sirius's best friend, James Potter, would buy Sirius the book and send it to Regulus by owl. Regulus's post, unlike Sirius's, wasn't monitored and Potter was smart enough to change the book's cover to something befitting the noble Black family just in case. Naturally, Sirius and Potter could've opted to just let him receive the book at Hogwarts, but Regulus guessed that his brother secretly liked his interest. Besides, an additional incentive for the agreement was that Regulus would occasionally also accept other packages and letters to hand over to Sirius.

Regulus would eagerly finish the course book over the summer holidays, although skipping the trivial parts and dedicating his time on topics related to Muggle history, politics and philosophy. Unfortunately, the course material focused mostly on dull stuff such as house appliances, Muggle celebrations and Muggle-Wizarding relations, so for the interesting stuff he had to go to the lengths of visiting Muggle bookstores.

While Regulus took a sip of his coffee, he noticed his brother was staring shamelessly at the group of Muggle girls at the other side of the shop. He couldn't resist the urge to roll his eyes in annoyance.

"Ah c'mon, they are totally checking us out!"

Yeah, right. Regulus snorted. "You, yes."

"They are eyeing you as well, you oaf. You know we are identical, right?"

This was both the truth and a lie. Yes, they looked very much alike; long, black, silky curls, grey eyes, high cheekbones. But their build was different; Regulus slimmer, his posture somewhat huddled compared to Sirius's. More importantly, Sirius had charisma, something Regulus lacked. It was obvious. Sirius walked confidently, smirked smugly, retorted cheekily. He walked like he owned the world and the world didn't owe him a thing. Sirius was cut out for the

position of heir. All that came with the duty came naturally to him; he was intelligent, bold, sharp, charismatic, a great dancer, a brilliant musician - the perfect embodiment of the House of Black. Still, for Sirius his position never felt as a duty, but as a burden instead. Regulus was positive that Mother would never have gone to such great lengths to get him back on the right path. She would've given up on Regulus way earlier - he never fitted the description anyway.

Regulus looked at the group of Muggle girls. They were cramped together around the table, eyeing Sirius shamelessly, all the time giggling. Suddenly, one of the girls raised from her seat and spinned around slowly, showing off her, probably new, clothes to her friends. Well, clothes, it was just a dress - an awfully, awfully short dress.

"Pretty, huh?" Sirius asked smugly.

Regulus slightly jumped off his chair. "Don't be daft." Unfortunately, he felt his face heat up and turn a very dark shade of scarlet.

Sirius snickered. "You are allowed to look at them, you know. They're just people. And a lot, lot more fun than our conservative witches, don't you think?"

Well, that depended on one's definition of fun. Regulus was positive that Mother would have a stroke at the sight of some girl wearing a dress like that - only nearly covering her backside, exposing her long legs and perfectly pedicured feet crammed into a pair of high heels.

For a moment, Regulus imagined Sirius entering their parental house, Grimmauld Place, arms hooked with this Muggle girl, and the shock on their parents' faces. The mere thought of Sirius, the heir of the Black Family, with this promiscuous Muggle on his side made him suddenly burst out in laughter.

Sirius looked at him questionably.

"So, have you ever been… with a Muggle?" he decided to ask, instead of sharing his train of imagination.

Sirius snorted. "Yes, between the claws of Walburga Black and the halls of Hogwarts, I have found loads of opportunities to go shag a Muggle."

Now it was Regulus's turn to snort. "You would make a mission out of it."

They were silent for a while, until Regulus continued. They never shared too much personal stuff - for Regulus it was generally favourable to not know too much about his brother and besides, they had few opportunities to have deep, personal conversations. At Hogwarts, they barely spoke privately, preferring to ignore each other as much as possible rather than to get sucked into the complex reality of their differences and the politics that were conducted outside of Hogwarts but still very much affected matters inside the school's walls. During the holidays they were stuck with each other, but the presence of family members reduced chances of heart-to-hearts tremendously.

"Then… have you ever been with a witch?" Regulus asked cautiously.

Sirius let out a bark of laughter, clearly enjoying Regulus's awkwardness. "Are you asking whether I've ever shagged someone, Reg?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Never mind, forget it."

Sirius laughed again. "No, no, it's okay - err, yes, last term… with someone. You want details? I can be very graphic, if you'd like."

"No - no, *please*, don't," Regulus retorted. The thought of details about his brother getting it on with someone made him uncomfortable at best.

"We can't all be prudes, Reggie," Sirius grinned. "How about you? Want to die never having touched a naked person?"

It happened instantly.

The colour drained from his face. The breath sucked from his mouth. His heart frozen, his stomach turned to ice.

Sirius must've noticed, for his eyes grew the size of Quaffles and his face turned an awful shade of pale. He quickly scooted over, but Regulus pulled away from his touch.

He really, really tried to calm himself down and pretend nothing was happening, but his hammering heart and shaking hands made it very difficult. The knowledge that Sirius knew what Regulus was thinking about, made him cringe. Comments like these would rarely conjure up such a strong reaction, as the counterpart didn't know - it was easy to shake a feeling off when no one knew the feeling existed. But being reminded that Sirius knew, and that Sirius knew how much it affected

him, kept the spiral going.

“Sorry - Reg - I’m so… sorry… I forgot - I didn’t mean - I meant -” he stuttered.

“Let’s go,” Regulus said in a small voice. He felt a wave of shame wash over him as his mind was forced back to the things he so desperately wanted to forget, the moving pictures flashing before his eyes. And there was Sirius - always cheerful, gifted, not a single care in the world.

Of course you didn’t think, of course you’d forget, he thought bitterly.

They went home in silence.

Chapter 3: Of Philosophy & A.S.S.es

“So, we’ve decided on somewhere around Easter. Perhaps a bit later, you know, chances of rain being smaller and all…”

“Err - what?”

“You know, *the wedding*. Merlin, what’s up with you? Do try to keep up with the conversation, will you, Reggie?”

Regulus sighed. “Sorry, you’re right, just thinking about tomorrow.” This was only partially true, but he didn’t feel like burdening Cissy with his worries. Besides, he was trying to win a very difficult match against Cissy’s wand.

They were currently sitting on the carpeting of his room at Black Manor - Cissy’s hair covered in some slimy, slightly reeking hair mask and done up in a bun, wearing a night robe, painting her left toenails an ugly shade of red with her wand. Regulus was on his stomach in his pyjamas, concentrating very hard on painting the other set, squeezing his eyes in an attempt to catch sight of where the nail ended, and the toe started.

“Ah, *bollocks*,” he swore, as he accidentally smudged one of the freshly painted nails. “I take back my words. Your wand is steady as a rock.”

Cissy laughed. “Told you. It’s harder than it seems.”

Although Cissy had recently turned twenty and was about to marry one of England’s wealthiest and well connected wizards, they sometimes still had childish moments like this, reminding Regulus why he was so fond of his cousin. He did wonder, though, whether her fiance, Lucius Malfoy, would appreciate the thought of Regulus being part of Cissy’s beauty ritual in one way or another. Lucius had always been nothing but polite and welcoming to Regulus, but well, there was the mores of the noble pureblood families to keep in mind.

“So, you looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts tomorrow?” Cissy continued.

Regulus nodded. “Obviously.” No more ‘close circle’ gatherings ending in relatives jinxing each other’s heads off, no more tiptoeing around Mother, no more dodging Uncle Alphard and his annoying horses. The thought of him getting to mind his own business and escaping the

constant tense atmosphere of Black Manor made him almost impatient.

“Yes, I reckon,” Cissy sighed. “It’d be nice to see your friends again. You still friends with that Crouch bloke?”

“Sure. And Rosier, Snape, Isa…”

Cissy smirked. “Ah, lovely, *beautiful* Isa…”

“You too?” Regulus said in indignation. “Why don’t people get we are *friends* and that’s all there’s to it.”

“Sure, Reggie,” Cissy said cheerfully, “but she’s been your best friend for years, she’s *very* pretty and she’s from one of the oldest pureblood families.”

“Yes,” Regulus nodded with a face indicating that this was all very true, but also very outdated news. “So?”

“Well, perhaps you… could be having your own wedding someday.”

Regulus snorted. “Cissy, you do realise I’m yet to turn fifteen? Believe me, I’m not planning on marrying anytime soon.”

Cissy rolled her blue eyes. “You’d be surprised how fast time goes by. And you’d better propose a worthy candidate yourself in due time, or they’ll marry you off to someone hideous.”

“Did *you* know you’d be marrying Lucius at the age of fourteen?"

Cissy seemed to think about this. “Well, I think we kind of knew when I was… sixteen. But Lucius wanted to focus on his career at the Ministry first, and well, three years have passed since…”

“Well, I’ll get back to you in two years, then.”

Cissy sighed in fake annoyance and spread the fingers of her right hand. “Try these - it’s easier than toenails.”

“Sure,” Regulus smiled. He started with her thumb, doing quite a marvellous job, thinking so himself. He was halfway finished with the index finger when the door burst open. Startled, Regulus hand made an uncontrolled lunge to the right, ending up in covering half of Cissy’s finger in the, still ugly, red nail polish. Both Cissy and Regulus swore.

“Oh I’m sorry,” Sirius said, half amused, half irritated at the sight of his brother painting his cousin’s nails. “Am I disturbing your little tea party?”

“Sirius,” Cissy said with a slight coldness to her voice. “What do you want?”

“Ah, can’t I just also long for a little … tête-à-tête with you two?” he said, smirking.

Both Cissy and Regulus shot him a sarcastic look.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Alright, I was looking for my Muggle Studies book. It didn’t happen to have … miraculously ended up here, did it?” Regulus was aware that Sirius was trying to figure out whether Cissy was aware of their arrangement, probably to toss it in her face at a convenient moment in case she was not.

“It’s over there,” Regulus nodded towards the stack of books on top of the dresser to Sirius’s left.

Sirius slowly went through the heap of books. He had to open every book that could possibly have a transfigured book cover, and since many of the books were unfamiliar to him, he had to open quite a few to get to the correct one.

“‘Jenseits von Gut und Böse’,” Sirius quoted one title in flawless German. “You’re reading about *German* philosophers now, Reg? A complete nutter, you are.”

“Just get the book, Sirius,” Cissy shot him sharply. “Can’t you accio it? It’ll spare us the unwanted company.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sirius said, raising his hands in surrender. “Got it already. I was hoping to get to the next part, though…”

Regulus shot him a confused look.

“Now it’s your turn, right?” Sirius grinned. “C’mon, red will look *ravishingly* good on you, Reg.”

He sprinted out of the room, just fast enough to dodge the pillow that Cissy had thrown at him.

“Tosser,” Regulus sighed. “Why is he always like this?”

“Well,” Cissy said, a wry smile across her face. “It must be hard to see

us being more like siblings than … well, you know, you two - being actual brothers."

Regulus snorted. "Well, he won't have to suffer for long. He'll meet his brother the second he boards the train."

*****

The next day, Regulus found himself eyeing the Hogwarts Express, steaming and apparently ready for take-off.

He, Sirius and Mother made their way to the train. Mother might have been petite - her appearance was nothing short of grande. She walked purposefully, her heels clicking dangerously on the ground beneath her, the black hair bun on her head as tight as her lips were pursed. People looked at the trio in awe - the Mother to the heir of one of the oldest wizarding families in England in front, Regulus walking behind her awkwardly and Sirius trudging behind her nonchalantly. The expression on Mother's face was a weird mix of pleased and unfazed.

"Well, off you go," she said coldly once they were about to board the train. "Do try to not disgrace your family any further," she shot Sirius. "And you -" she looked at Regulus "- don't make a fool out of yourself."

Ah, the lovely words of goodbye from a mother.

"Yes, Mother," Regulus said, picking up his trunk and shoving it up the train. He shot a glance at the scene behind him. Sirius and Mother were in the middle of some cold, disturbing stare-off. After a tad too long, Sirius raised his chin, nodded an icy "Mother," and boarded the train too.

Both Regulus and Sirius sighed, locking gazes.

"Well," said Regulus awkwardly.

"Yeah," said Sirius.

"See ya," they said in unison.

And so started their annual agreement to avoid each other as much as possible until Christmas, only openly recognising their existence in the form of forced pleasantries and absolute emergencies.

Sirius went down the aisle to the left, Regulus to the right.

*****

Regulus took a seat in a carriage in the usual part of the train. Although teachers tried to encourage interaction between the students of different houses, it was still quite a segregated affair. Sure, they shared classes and clubs, but meals were consumed at separate tables, they had their own dorms, their own Quidditch team and so on. Regulus knew that the other three houses - Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff - did mingle to some extent, but the Slytherins liked to keep to themselves.

As the train wouldn't leave in another fifteen minutes, Regulus grabbed the book that Sirius had commented on in his bedroom from his trunk, and was disappointed to realise that he'd almost finished it. He was entirely immersed in one of the last pages, when the scraping sound of the compartment's door forced him back to reality. In the opening were Evan and Barty, followed by Isa.

"If it isn't the world's biggest swot," Evan said as a mode of greeting. He grinned broadly and sat down next to him.

"One day he will topple the Ministry with an army of books," Barty said, his smile partially annoyed and partially approving.

"Just because the two of you are illiterate twits doesn't mean the rest of us don't fancy some light reading," Isa smirked. She gave Regulus a peck on his cheek - something only she and Cissy were allowed to do - and sat down at the opposite bench.

Barty shot him a suggestive look, something that didn't go past Isa as well.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Crouch," she said playfully with her thick posh accent, before glancing at the book. "What *are* you reading though?"

Regulus was too late to dodge the snatch of Isa, who grabbed the book out of his hands and started leafing through it with raised eyebrows. "German philosophy? I am forced to agree with Rosier, dear - you definitely *are* a swot."

Barty shot a glance at the book over Isa's shoulder. "You speak

German?" He looked impressed.

Isa rolled her eyes. "Obviously. We ancient purebloods get at least four languages hammered into our brains while the wet nurses are still feeding us."

Regulus laughed. It was not too far from the truth. A great part of his youth consisted of different teachers drilling French, German and ancient Latin and Greek into his brain. Since Isa's father had worked quite some time in Assyria, she even spoke Arabic fluently. It was an old and distinguished habit to learn different languages, a symbol of wealth and nobility. It had become rare, though -even the Malfoys, Rosiers and Lestranges didn't uphold the tradition anymore.

There weren't many families that rivalled the House of Black in terms of wealth, ancestry and power, but with the Nott family it was an equal race. Isa was the oldest of three girls, her sisters too young to attend Hogwarts anytime soon. She was one of the only people, apart from her cousins and brother, that truly understood what it was like to grow up in the milieu into which they were born. Running in the same circles and being of the same age, Regulus did see quite a lot of Isa throughout his youth, sharing some homeschool classes and pulling towards one another during the numerous dreadful social events they were forced into.

Once they both attended Hogwarts and were sorted into the same house - the honourable house of Slytherin - their close friendship was a fait accompli.

Besides, she was one of the wittiest people Regulus knew, one of their year's best in classes and definitely one of the most knowledgeable beyond their textbooks.

In that regard, it surely was a shame she was beautiful. Also currently, her golden hair perfectly braided, warm brown eyes, perfectly tailored robes and extremely expensive though subtle jewellery on her fingers, around her neck and in her ears - enough to make her stand out in the egalitarian school robes she would soon change into, ensuring, at all times, it was clear that she was cut above the rest. Not many people bothered to look past her beauty though, as if her appearance left no space for anything else. Regulus knew it was something that greatly bothered her.

"It's not just philosophy," Regulus shot, "it's about power, justice and the morality of leadership--"

“You sound like a progressive crook,” Barty cut him off.

“On the contrary,” Regulus argued, “he makes a very solid case for leaving power in families like ours and underlines the importance of our families’ values, you know - nobility, pride, strength.”

“Must’ve been a Slytherin, then,” Evan chipped in.

“Yeah, he was a Muggle though,” Regulus said, realising that fact perhaps wasn’t obvious, “but if he’d been a wizard, a Slytherin through and through.”

“Have you guys read the letter in the Daily Prophet then?” Crouch asked curiously.

“Well, obviously,” said Isa, “all our families are signatories. I’m sure Mum is dying to plaster several copies onto the walls at home.”

“Well, I think it was brilliant,” Barty continued. “It was about time that people learned the truth about Mudbloods and their position in society.”

Isa and Regulus raised their eyebrows, apparently both feeling that Barty hadn’t quite gotten the gist of the letter.

Which was typical Barty - he wasn’t stupid, but subtlety wasn’t his forte. His magic wanted to move, to stir, to push; he was very competent with his wand and a good dueller, but theory and the fine art of politics wasn’t his strongest suit. Bloody ironic, since his father was one of the most important politicians out there. According to the rumours, it was very likely that he’d be appointed Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement anytime soon.

“I haven’t read it, care to toss me the paper?”

Of course Evan hadn’t read it yet. With all the crucial things he probably had to do so far today.

Evan quickly flipped to the relevant page of that day’s issue of the Prophet and started to read, Regulus reading along over his shoulder, although he’d read it already and had heard Sirius ranting about its contents all morning - though discreetly. He knew it was better not to get on the wrong side of Mother so close to his long-awaited freedom.

1 September, 1975

To the Esteemed Readers of the Daily Prophet,

In response to the recent open letter advocating for the mingling of Muggleborns and Purebloods as a solution to the Wizarding world's perceived declining birthrate, we, the undersigned, feel it incumbent upon us to provide a counterpoint. We do not write to undermine those born of Muggles but to honour the legacy and distinctiveness of our cherished Wizarding heritage, which we believe should be protected, not diluted.

It is a common misconception that the dilution of bloodlines, through mingling of magical and non-magical heritage, will somehow secure the future of our kind. Such claims, however well-intentioned, overlook an essential truth: that it is neither just nor kind to place the burden of this choice on those born into a world where they will forever straddle two realities. Muggleborns, admirable though many of them are, inhabit a unique space in our world. They often face the heart-wrenching task of reconciling two conflicting identities—one tethered to the magical world and the other to their non-magical origins. In pushing for further intermingling, we risk creating even more individuals who, through no fault of their own, find themselves belonging fully to neither world.

It is a tragedy, not a triumph, to stand divided between two distinct existences, ever the outsider, ever longing for true belonging. Those who bear the weight of this divided lineage must navigate a complex, and often painful, existence. It is our duty as responsible members of society not to multiply such dilemmas, but to preserve the purity of the ancient Wizarding lines that offer stability and continuity to the magical world. These lines, passed down through generations, carry the depth of history, power, and a sense of place within our shared community that must not be cast aside.

We must also ask ourselves—what becomes of the inherent magic passed down through generations when it is mingled with non-magical heritage? Magic, in its purest form, is a precious gift, refined through time and lineage. Families whose blood has remained unbroken by Muggle interference have nurtured and honed this gift, ensuring its continuation in its fullest, strongest form. Are we truly to believe that this magic, carefully guarded over centuries, is of no more consequence than a fleeting alliance with those who can neither comprehend nor contribute to its enduring legacy?

The longevity and strength of the Wizarding world depend on the

preservation of its purest bloodlines. It is not through the diminishing of this precious heritage, but rather through its careful and deliberate preservation, that we shall ensure our future. We recognise the necessity of maintaining a strong and healthy magical population; however, this must be done with the understanding that the strength of our community lies not in a hasty mingling of divergent worlds, but in the honouring of those traditions which have withstood the test of time.

The noble houses of Britain have safeguarded this magic for centuries, and it is our solemn belief that in doing so, we safeguard the very essence of the Wizarding world. Let us not forget that the preservation of magical purity ensures that future generations will not be divided between two worlds, but rather rooted firmly in the traditions, values, and power of the one to which they wholly belong.

We do not propose exclusion or of, but we do advocate for the protection of a heritage that is ancient, revered, and integral to the fabric of our magical society. Muggleborns have their place, and it is a valued one. But that place is not within the veins of those families whose proud legacy is their purity. To weaken our bloodlines is to weaken the very foundation of our magical community, and this is a course of action we cannot in good conscience endorse.

Yours with utmost respect for tradition and the preservation of our world ,

The Noble Houses of Black, Nott, Malfoy, Greengrass, Lestrange, Rosier, Selwyn.

“Okay,” said Evan once he finished reading. “That makes sense.”

Although Regulus didn’t know whether Evan actually understood, he did agree with the sentiment that the letter made sense.

He had never given it much thought - what it’d be like to be Muggleborn, or a halfblood for that matter. Throughout his still rather short life, he had often fantasised what it’d be like to be born in another family. No big mansions but a small, cosy home. No dinner parties but late family breakfast in bed. No talk about heritage or money, but about wishes and chosen futures. He’d always fight off this train of thought because he knew he had to be grateful - so many opportunities ahead of him merely because of his ancestry, so much knowledge bestowed upon him because they had the means….

At any rate, he’d never thought about a partial Muggle heritage. All

the silly fantasies had magic parents and relatives in them - magic was a given, it was everywhere.

It must be hard to not be a pureblood. To be partially non-magic, always being half. *Ever the outsider, ever longing for true belonging. Belonging fully to neither world.* Regulus wouldn't wish that on anyone, on no innocent child.

*****

Regulus had never really cared for the Sorting Ceremony, apart from the one in which he was sorted himself in his first year. It was always too crowded and busy - all the people trying to catch up on two months of holidays over the course of one meal, the anxious first years, the same boring speech by Dumbledore. No, Regulus much more preferred a quick bite and the calm and peace of the Slytherin dungeon.

However, they were forced to be present at the Start-of-Term Feast and Regulus was hungry, so he sat down at the Slytherin table, hungry and bored. Evan gestured to some people to sit with them and ranted on cheerfully about his uncle's mead he had tried over the holidays.

In the end, Regulus ended up with Barty and Evan on one side and three blokes - Severus Snape, Dimitri Mulciber and Bertram Avery - on his other side. Across the table was Isa, Amaryllis Greengrass on one side and Sabrina Selwyn on the other.

Severus, Mulciber and Avery were fifth years. Regulus didn't know Mulciber and Avery very well, but he studied with Severus in the library sometimes. Both of them in complete silence, absorbed by their own books, but at the same table to keep unwanted company out. Also, Regulus had the distinct feeling that Severus sometimes sought out his company to avoid the bullying of Sirius and his friends. With all the talk about respecting Mudbloods and halfbloods, his brother spent an awful lot of time bullying people for the mere fun of it.

Amaryllis Greengrass was one of Isa's friends, such an overly optimistic and cheerful girl Regulus was surprised she hadn't ended up in Hufflepuff. This stood in stark contrast with the other girl, Sebrina Selwyn. With her hair as dark as her soul - if she even had one - and her black, vicious eyes, she could've been trained by Bellatrix. The only reason Regulus highly doubted that, was the knowledge that his

cousin would have offed her within five minutes. The girl was so incredibly thick that back in the day, Sirius had betted on her turning out to be a Squib. Regulus, realising the girl would be in the same year as him and aware that luck was rarely on his side, had betted against it. At least it'd earned him two galleons.

"Fancy seeing you here, Snape," the girl in question shot Severus. "Thought you wouldn't show up when I didn't spot you on the train. Or were you sitting with your Mudblood again?" She smiled viciously.

"Leave the thinking to others, Selwyn," Severus said coldly. "You wouldn't want to wear out your brain so early in the term."

Regulus snickered.

"I heard she's become a prefect," Selwyn continued. "What do you think she had to do to earn that badge? Shag-"

"Oh, don't worry, Sabrina," Isa cut her off, patting her on her shoulder mockingly, "I'm sure that Dumbledore will take you into consideration once you learn how to get down to the Dungeon yourself."

This earned a loud bark of laughter from all of them.

"Their time will come," Selwyn continued, eyeing the Gryffindor table, apparently unaware of the scornful remark. "Tell me, Regulus, how's your blood traitor of a brother doing? He really has no shame, has he?"

Merlin, the girl was on the warpath.

Regulus followed her gaze to the Gryffindor table. There he was - his brother, laughing amicably with his friends. Across the table were Pettigrew, a thick small bloke, and Lupin, a bit of an inconspicuous bloke whose Prefect badge stood out all the more. Nudging him playfully was James Potter - Sirius's best friend, the brother he had never had. Regulus had gotten rather skilled in avoiding his brother and little gang of friends, and he was sure that they also had been instructed to steer away from pranking and interacting with him. Still, he always felt a small tug of something he couldn't place or name, seeing his brother so amicably and cheerfully messing around with his friends.

"He really does get more handsome by the day, doesn't he?" Amaryllis asked dreamily, eyeing Sirius too.

“Don’t be thick,” Isa shot her quickly, sensing the tension radiating from Regulus. “There’s no way you’re dating a Gryffindor. Hell, go ask a Hufflepuff out if you’re desperate.”

Not at all liking the direction in which the conversation was going, Regulus was relieved to see McGonagall enter the Great Hall, a group of anxious first years in tow.

The entire Hall went silent, their eyes on the Sorting Hat that broke out in a song:

“*Another year has come to pass,*
And now I’m here to guide,
I'll place you where your talents fit,
And where your hearts reside.

Four Houses stand, each strong and proud,
With gifts that shape us all,
But heed my words, brave witches, wizards
Together we stand tall.

First, there’s Gryffindor, fierce and bold,
With courage in their chest,
They’ll face the fire and charge ahead,
Where others dare not test.

Then Hufflepuff, so just and true,
With kindness by their side,
Loyalty and hard work shine
In them, you can confide.

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
Where wit and wisdom reign,
They seek the truth and sharpen minds,
Their knowledge is their gain.

And don’t forget Slytherin,
With cunning, sharp, and sly,
Ambition drives them ever on,
To reach where others dream to fly.

So now you see, the choice is made,
Your house awaits your name,
But mark me well, the times are dark,
The future's not the same.

Unite your hearts, your minds, your hands,
Against the rising night,
For Hogwarts stands when we all stand
Together in the fight.

So wear me now, upon your head,
And listen to my song
For when divided, we may fall,
But together, we are strong!"

The Hall broke out in applause.

"How original," Evan said sarcastically. "Always the same bollocks about us having to "unite" and all that."

"That reminds me," Barty said all of a sudden, "I remember overhearing father about some programme… house unity something…"

"I wouldn't mind *some* level of house unity," Amaryllis smirked. This earned her a smack on the head from Isa. "What? You do realise that Black and Potter are about the most popular blokes to walk the castle?"

"Did you get hit in the head by a bludger?" Isa asked coldly.

"No, I'm serious! Loads of girls fancy them."

Regulus tried to shrug off the uneasy feeling that crept over him, but it wasn't until the food suddenly appeared on the table - and he'd apparently entirely missed the sorting and opening speech - that he realised he had not succeeded.

Once everyone had several helpings of everything, the food disappeared as sudden as it had appeared, and Dumbledore got to his feet. The hall fell silent.

"Just a few start-of-term notices before you head off to your respective dormitories," he started. He ranted on with the same boring speech that he delivered every year - the forbidden items on Filch's list that no one gave a rat's arse about, the forbidden forest that was forbidden for a reason and no one entered anyway and the rule not to use magic in the corridors between classes, flouted by everyone once there were no teachers or prefects in sight.

Evan yawned deliberately loudly next to him, and Regulus couldn't

agree more - until the speech took a turn it hadn't done any of the years before.

"Yes, I am sure that you are all longing for the comfort of your beds," Dumbledore chuckled. "However, first, I would like to announce a very exciting and rather necessary programme that will commence at Hogwarts this year."

People started to whisper expectantly.

"This year will mark the start of The Amulgation & Socialisation Scheme."

Which might've been the most meaningless title for any programme ever.

"This is a multi-annual and cross-year programme with the ultimate goal to boast house unity and foster friendly relations between students whose paths otherwise would not have crossed. Now, this is a dual programme - one part applies to all students at Hogwarts. For the other part, several students will be selected and subsequently assembled in different groups. Among these groups, a competition will take place, with, of course, a prize for the winning students."

Evan snorted. "In his wildest dreams I'm going to play a game with some stupid third year Hufflepuffs."

Regulus agreed. No way that he was going to give up his precious time for some ludicrous programme trying him to rub elbows with some Hufflepuffs - or worse, Gryffindors. *Pathetic* .

"The students participating in the competition are selected and placed in groups randomly," Dumbledore said, evidently raising many questions among the students in front of him. "Everyone participates in the selection process, and once selected, participation is compulsory."

Regulus groaned in annoyance, like the majority of his friends. *Of course* , they'd come up with a way to force students into participating. No Slytherin would've voluntarily subjected themselves to cooperating with some daft second year from another House.

"The selected students and groups will be presented next Sunday, and practical matters will be disclosed in due time. For now, suffice it to say that dark times are approaching. More than ever, we need to come together, to unite and overcome our differences - starting at

Hogwarts."

"Oh, great," Isa muttered, annoyed. "More of the Sorting Hat's rubbish."

"However, for now - off to your dormitories, where a good night's sleep awaits you all!"

And with that, all the students rose from their seats, whispering expectantly about the information the Headmaster had just conveyed. Also among the Slytherins making their way down the dungeons, it was the sole topic of discussion.

"Even if I'm selected," said Xander Crabbe, one of Regulus's dorm mates, once they had all entered their dormitory and were in the process of putting their pyjamas on. "I'll just write father. Like Dumbledore can actually tell us what to do."

"Same," yawned Evan. "Complete nutter, he is."

Barty looked rather pale. "I'm sure father will expect me to participate."

"Obviously," chipped Sylas Selwyn - Sabrina Selwyn's twin brother - in, voice full of disdain. "This programme has your dad written all over it. I'm sure they're great pals, your father and that lunatic."

Regulus saw Barty's eyes flash. It was a common event - Barty being berated because of his father. It was not surprising, though, since Crouch Sr. perhaps wasn't a progressive, but definitely a conformist, and a very powerful one, too. And many ideas propagated by the new revolutionaries weren't very conformist. Every parent of Regulus's dorm mates, without a doubt, supported the emergent revolution, all bearing names of ultra-traditional pureblood families - Rosier, Crabbe and Selwyn. Regulus knew that, despite his father's stance and career, Barty was very loyal to the cause - definitely the most fervent supporter among his friends. He knew he was ashamed of his father.

"Piss off, Selwyn," Barty sneered. Sylas laughed disdainfully and got into bed, closing his curtains.

"One more time and I'm going to use an Unforgivable on him," Barty hissed before entering his bed as well.

Regulus, absolutely knackered from the day, also got into his bed, shutting his drapes and staring at the ceiling. He quickly casted a

silencing spell and tried to get comfortable, but despite the plush duvet and soft pillow, it was hard to close his eyes. Perhaps today, the stupid unity programme and fresh impressions of a new year at Hogwarts would keep away the endless stream of thoughts, fear, shame, skin and sweat that occupied his mind. He knew it was getting worse - or more, that it had gotten worse, since the start of the holidays. There were no dreamless nights anymore, and he was longing for the nights in which only faces and barely distinguishable words visited him. He dreaded the other nights, the ones that were much more common, in which he felt everything, smelled all of it, heard every word. He'd wake up, sweating and panting, cowering in shame, the level of self-loathing unfathomable, begging for no one to enter his mind and witness all that had been played out in front of him in his head. Sometimes he retched, other times he cried.

It wasn't until late in the night, his dorm mates' snoring in an almost soothing rhythm, that he met his demons when he finally fell asleep.

Chapter 4: Of Quidditch & Unforgivables

Luckily, the first week at Hogwarts was rather eventful - it ensured that, although he still suffered from nightmares, Regulus would at least fall asleep quickly leaving no room to dwell on things.

Classes started on Wednesday to give the students a day to settle in, for which Regulus was very grateful once he'd seen his timetable.

"Merlin, you're killing yourself, you," Evan said once he caught a glimpse of Regulus's schedule that their Head of House, Horace Slughorn, had just handed over. "How many classes are you *taking* ?"

"Ah," grinned Isa, just sitting down and overhearing the last part of the situation. "You're still taking all the electives except for divination and Muggle Studies?"

Regulus nodded. "Yes, you?"

"I'm taking divination too," Isa grunted. "I wanted to drop it, but father wasn't having it."

Regulus looked at Isa's timetable and felt for her - his own schedule was already pretty swamped, but he at least had two free blocks a week. During these blocks, divination took place, meaning she'd be in class from eight until five every single day.

"Shit," he whispered. "You'll barely have time to breathe - you sure you can't owl your mum or anything?"

Isa smiled wryly. "Nah. The discussion turned rather nasty over the holidays. It's settled, I'm apparently only worthy of my name if I take O.W.L.s in eleven subjects."

"But we'll be having a good time, won't we, Barty mate?" Evan said cheerfully. "I have loads of free blocks - look, after lunch tomorrow, before lunch on Thursdays…"

*****

Despite the tight schedule and the endless warnings that this year's workload would be horrendous in light of preparation for the next year's O.W.L.s, Regulus felt confident he'd waltz through fourth year. He'd just have to make sure to find time to finish his homework, and it'd be a no-brainer, really.

It helped that he actually liked studying. Sure, there were subjects he'd probably drop if he'd been brave enough to face Mother in the unfortunate event - like Care of Magical Creatures - but overall, he was rather content with the courses. He was especially fond of Potions, Ancient Runes and Defence against the Dark Arts.

The teaching positions at Hogwarts were quite a stagnant affair - most teachers would teach their subjects for years, decades even, meaning that many teachers had often taught students' parents or would likely teach students' future children. On the one hand it was annoying, because many of them had nostalgic tendencies and felt the need to bring up stories about students' parents, much to their embarrassment. However, it also came in handy - having the same teacher for years meant students knew what to expect, where the teacher's boundaries lied, whether you could easily skive off their classes, sleep during them or hand in homework too late without consequences. Not that Regulus generally did any of that; he knew that Mother's hearing wasn't confined to the room she was in physically.

Yet, there was one subject that apparently couldn't keep any teacher's interest for longer than a year; every September, Dumbledore would introduce a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. So far, they had been lumbered with someone who was definitely part troll - Selwyn looked almost bright in comparison -, someone that might've been close to a squib and someone that was most certainly an ex-convict.

So, it was with great curiosity that, on Wednesday, after a block of Transfiguration, Regulus slid into a seat next to Isa at the back of the Defense classroom. Barty and Evan were in the row before them, snickering about some second year they'd hexed in the corridor. For Regulus, picking seats was always a strange and delicate balancing act of following his eagerness to study well (meaning he'd sit up front) and his preference to go unnoticed (meaning he'd sit all the way in the back). In the spirit of better safe than sorry, since he had no idea what kind of teacher he was about to face, he'd chosen to take a seat at the rear of the classroom.

The classroom was already filled with fourth year Slytherins and Gryffindors - with whom they apparently shared the class - when their new teacher entered. Regulus, who had been distracted by the buzz of the opening feast and old yet still new impressions, hadn't taken a closer look at him before. He looked quite young - thirtyish, his hair was trimmed, he was muscular and broad, and he walked at a pace that evoked interest and respect, his boots clomping confidently.

“Morning, class,” he said in a deep voice. He was hard to read - he didn’t look unkind but not friendly either. “I am Professor Thorne. Welcome to another year of Defense Against the Dark Arts. I believe I’ll be your fourth teacher, although, having looked at your curriculum so far, I might’ve easily been your first.”

Some people snickered.

“We will take … a different course this year,” he continued. “Things are happening out there, new things, things *very* closely related to the dark arts - making this subject all the more relevant.”

Regulus was sure that he’d never seen Barty sit so straight before.

“That’s why we’ll focus on the real things - the things that are actually out there, the things that are happening. I want you to be prepared for what’s coming, so there’ll be no candy coating in my classroom.”

“ *Wicked* ,” Barty whispered excitedly.

“Now, let’s start with something that I’m sure will prove very relevant in your future. Who can tell me what the Unforgivable Curses are?”

Several hands shot in the air - enough that Regulus decided to sit this one out. It was a rather easy topic, anyway.

“Yes, Mr….?”

“Taylor, Sir,” said some Gryffindor. He looked way too pleased to be answering Thorne’s first ever question. “The Unforgivable Curses are widely considered the three most sinister dark spells one could cast.”

Ah, almost literally quoted from the textbook.

“Very good. Five points to Gryffindor,” Thorne said, making the Taylor bloke look way too smug. “And what curses are they, and what do they do?”

Barty raised his hand very eagerly, drawing Thorne’s attention to their corner of the classroom.

“Yes, Mr…?”

“Crouch,” Barty said in a low voice, “Crouch Jr.” This seemed to spark Thorne’s interest, but he only showed it for a split second before his gaze went back to normal. “So, there’s the Imperius curse, which makes you completely control the one you cast the spell on. Then

there's the Crusciatus curse, which tortures them, and, of course, the Killing curse."

"Good. Five points to Slytherin," Thorne continued. "Now this is all theory, of course. I am curious whether any of you has actually ever witnessed one of these curses and what they do."

His gaze passed slowly over his students, lingering a bit around Evan and, finally, coming to a stop at Regulus.

"Mr. Black?" he asked tentatively.

Only the fact that Regulus knew what it felt like to be prodded into your brain through Occlumency ensured him that Thorne wasn't actually trying to read his mind - his gaze was piercing, investigative, as if he was trying to throw him off. Regulus was familiar with the Unforgivables on another level than most of his classmates, he was sure, but he steered any thought in that direction back to the classroom and the question that'd been just asked.

"I'm sure that the use of any of these spells will send the caster to Azkaban immediately, Professor Thorne. So, no, Sir," Regulus decided to answer.

Thorne looked taken back a bit by this answer, and then laughed. "Yes, Mr. Black, that is most certainly the case. Still, I will, for educational purposes, demonstrate the spells once. So you have an idea what you're up against."

He conjured a sparrow out of thin air - which was quite impressive. It took a split second before Regulus's praise was replaced by a jolt of pity. Was he truly going to kill this bird just for educational purposes? His friends didn't seem to share this concern, as both Barty and Evan were on the edge of their seats, looking at Thorne and the sparrow in sheer awe and anticipation.

"So, let's start with the Imperius curse," Thorne continued. He pointed his wand at the little bird and said, "Imperio!".

The bird seemed to follow the direction of the wand with perfect precision. Thorne gave it a swing to the right, sending the sparrow darting that way, and then a swing back to the left, making the bird return. He followed with a series of flips in the air, looking very unnatural for such a bird, before directing it to land abruptly on the Taylor dude's desk.

“So, that brings us to the Cruciatus,” Thorne said matter-of-factly, and he raised his wand again, exclaiming “ *Crucio!* ”

Regulus knew by now that, no matter how many times you’d witness this curse, it would always feel like the first time. It’d provoke the same shudder, the same amount of hairs standing upright, the same jerk of nausea.

Back in the classroom, the little bird screamed in its own language - *stop, stop, please, stop* - squirming and screeching. It looked like it couldn’t breathe, too occupied with battling the pain it was subjected to merely for the purpose of educating a bunch of, generally uninterested, fourth years. Now all them were interested, though - repulsed or excited, but interested all the same.

With a flick of the wand, the sparrow was put out of its misery.

“Now, that leaves us…”

And with another flick, and a jet of green light, life left the sparrow’s eyes. It dropped on the desk with a blunt *clunk* that sent Regulus back into the past instantly.

“Come on now, Siri, admit it,” Bellatrix shrieked frantically. “You don’t want your Mum to go prod in your brain, now do you, darling? She’ll find out about all the naughty things you’ve been up to…”

“It wasn’t me, Bella!” a seven-year-old Sirius sobbed. The small boy was shaking, his grey eyes filled with terror. “I swear it wasn’t me!”

They were at the beach at their estate of Seacliff Hill. It was almost time for supper, and Regulus was worried that the quarrel between his brother and cousin would make them late. Just a couple of days before, Bella had locked Regulus in the cupboard in the cellar. He had been locked up for hours, and only when he had to go to the bathroom so badly he was sure he was going to wet himself - the door had miraculously opened. The idea of Mother finding him after hours, having wet himself, had been so terrifying he’d magically opened the cupboard. Surely, Mother had still been furious - she hadn’t believed “his little fantasy” about the cupboard and had locked him up in his bedroom for three days straight. Regulus had just regained his freedom and wasn’t very happy at the prospect of it being contained again once they didn’t make supper on time.

“I don’t believe you,” Bellatrix said with a vicious smile. “You’ve always

struck me as a liar--" she was distracted by Sirius's fluffy red cat that seemed to appear out of nowhere, walking happily over to its owner, purring contently.

"Give me your cat," Bellatrix ordered.

Sirius, afraid of his dearest possession ending up in the hands of his furious cousin, sternly shook his head. "No."

"Oh," laughed Bellatrix. "You will obey. Are you sure that it wasn't Mr. Whisker that ate all of my chocolates?"

Oh. So this was all about Bellatrix's chocolates…

"You know cats don't eat chocolate," Sirius said, sounding a great deal bolder than his trembling hands proved him to be.

"How would you know? For all you know, Mr. Whiskers has broken into my room and devoured all the chocolates that Rodolphus gifted me. If it wasn't you…"

"It wasn't," Sirius said sternly.

"In that case, dear Siri," Bellatrix laughed. "I'm forced to put the blame on your cat." She sighed, and with the flick of her wand, she summoned Mr. Whiskers into her arms. Sensing the imminent threat, it abruptly stopped purring and started hissing instead. Its tail grew twice its original width.

Bellatrix put Mr. Whiskers on the ground and shot a mean smile at Sirius.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A green jet of light ended the light in Mr. Whisker's eyes, Sirius falling onto the ground in horror and disbelief. At first, he started poking and probing his beloved pet, but he quickly turned to soft caressing strokes, crying furiously over the loss he'd just suffered.

"Now, now, Siri, let's not dwell on death, we don't want to be late for supper."

And with another vicious smile, she started her way back to the house.

Regulus felt the chocolates in his pocket almost burn a hole into the fabric.

"Tut tut," Bellatrix whispered, slowly brushing past him. "If dear Siri knew that his baby brother's got his dearest friend killed…"

She laughed.

The sound of stunned gasps snapped Regulus back to the classroom, where everyone was staring at the motionless bird on the desk.

"*Wicked* ," Barty repeated.

*****

Their new Defense teacher was the topic of conversation for the rest of the day, and would remain so for a long time. Apparently he had demonstrated the Unforgivables to all classes, only sparing the first and second-years - surely only to avoid trouble with parents and the school governors.

On Thursday still the only matter discussed during breakfast was Professor Thorne and the Unforgivables.

Regulus was deeply absorbed by a new book he'd just started from some Muggle strategist, Machiavelli. He had come across his name several times in other books, so he hadn't thought twice when running into some of his work in Muggle Manchester and had bought all he could find. The current book, *Il Principe*, was in Italian, but with his fluency in Latin and French, it was rather easy to work out. Besides, he preferred reading in any other language than English because somehow it led to less questions from his friends about him reading Muggle books. Linguistic incomprehension always proved to be quite the barrier for interrogating about Muggle affinity.

"I'd bet ten galleons that Thorne is one of us," Barty interrupted Regulus's reading. "No progressive nutter would use the Unforgivables in front of us - too afraid we might wet ourselves."

"And in the first class! Imagine what else he's got in store for us," said Evan dreamily.

"We don't know he's one of us though," said Regulus. "You really think Dumbledore would let a revolutionary teach? While going to the lengths of forcing house unity and all that crap with that programme?"

"He might have been forced," chipped Severus in. Regulus hadn't noticed him sitting down next to him, as engrossed he had been by his new book. Severus, nosy as ever, shot Regulus's book a curious glance. He sneakily shoved the book away from his prying eyes.

“His name would’ve come up before, though,” Isa voiced from across the table. “We tend to run in the same circles. I’ve never heard of him.”

“No, I *feel* he’s one of us. It just feels… right,” Evan said.

“Are you in love, Rosier?” Regulus asked dryly.

“Completely besotted,” Evan grinned. “Mark my words, he’s one of the good guys.”

“Whatever, I just hope this wasn’t a one time thing to get our attention - do you think he’ll have us duel? Or try the Unforgivables ourselves?” asked Barty with a hopeful voice.

Severus snorted lightly and raised his eyebrows. “You really think Thorne will have fourth-years using Unforgivables on each other and … no one bats an eye?”

But Barty’s enthusiasm couldn’t be faltered. “Or perhaps he’ll have us try Occlumency… I’ve always wanted to be able to read people’s minds…”

Regulus, having strong feelings about Occlumency and a fair share of experience with its utility, quickly shifted his focus to his book.

“Why don’t you ask, though?” Severus asked. Regulus gave him a quizzical look. “Why don’t you ask any of your family?”

That was actually not a bad idea - Regulus was meaning to write Cissy anyway, and if she didn’t know, at least her fiancé would know. He was well-connected within the Ministry and the right circles.

“Sure, I’ll ask.”

At that moment, the Great Hall was filled with the flurry of hundreds of owls, and Regulus waited patiently for one of the Prophet’s birds to fly its way to him. When it finally landed, he slipped some coins into its pouch and placed a treat in its beak. He smoothened out the paper and was immediately drawn to the front-page article.

———

Concerns Mount Over Government’s Progressive Agenda

By Elara Fawley, Senior Correspondent

In recent months, disquiet has been growing throughout the Wizarding community as the Ministry of Magic, under the current administration, steers the nation onto an increasingly progressive course. This shift has raised alarms amongst many, particularly within the more traditional families who fear that the fabric of our magical society is being unravelled under the guise of "modernisation" and inclusivity.

Among the most hotly debated proposals is new legislation which aims to combat the declining birthrate within the Wizarding world. The Ministry is reportedly considering introducing policies that would encourage mixed marriages—specifically between Purebloods and Muggleborns—as a remedy to population stagnation. Sources within the Ministry suggest that this initiative could become mandatory, with incentives offered to ensure compliance.

A related proposal currently under review is the establishment of a subsidised programme to integrate Squibs into magical society. The programme would provide government-funded support to Squibs, traditionally on the margins of our world, in order to facilitate their participation in Wizarding culture through non-magical means such as clerical work or partnerships with Muggle businesses. Advocates claim that this would foster inclusivity, but detractors argue that it undermines the essence of what it means to be a part of the magical community.

Magnus Alaric Nott, a prominent voice against this progressive trend, expressed his deep concerns to the Daily Prophet. "We are heading down a dangerous path," Nott stated. "By encouraging these so-called mixed marriages, the Ministry risks diluting our magical bloodlines, which have stood for centuries. It is not our responsibility to solve the birthrate issue by erasing the rich history and identity of Pureblood families."

These sentiments were echoed by Abraxas Malfoy, a well-respected member of one of the oldest and most influential Pureblood families in Britain. "This legislation is an affront to the traditions that have kept our society strong for generations," Malfoy remarked during a recent gathering at Malfoy Manor. "Integration of Squibs into our world, as though they possess the same standing as witches and wizards, is a folly we cannot afford. Squibs, by their very nature, do not belong in the magic world. Forcing them into the magical sphere disrupts the natural order."

Malfoy's words have resonated with many, particularly amongst those who are increasingly wary of the growing influence of Muggle ideas and values

within the Ministry. Critics of the current administration argue that these reforms, though dressed in the language of progress, threaten to undermine the very foundation of magical society.

However, not all share these views. Known supporters of the proposed legislation include none other than Fleamont Potter and Albus Dumbledore, both of whom have long championed inclusivity and equality in the Wizarding world. Fleamont Potter, patriarch of the Potter family, has been a vocal proponent of unity between Purebloods, Half-bloods, and Muggleborns. Potter believes that embracing all magical individuals, regardless of their background, is the key to ensuring a more robust and sustainable future for the Wizarding world. "It is not the purity of one's blood that matters," Potter was quoted as saying at a recent Ministry gala, "but the purity of one's intent."

Albus Dumbledore, meanwhile, has lent his formidable reputation and intellectual weight to the initiative, supporting the integration of Squibs as a moral obligation. "We cannot turn our backs on those who, though they may lack magical abilities, have the heart and will to contribute to our society," Dumbledore stated in a recent interview. "The progress of our world depends on our capacity for compassion, not on the exclusion of those who are different."

Despite these endorsements, scepticism remains widespread, particularly amongst the more traditional segments of society. Many fear that the push for progressiveness is accelerating too rapidly, and that in the rush to embrace inclusivity, we are losing sight of the fundamental values that have defined the Wizarding world for centuries.

An anonymous senior official within the Ministry spoke to the Daily Prophet off the record, voicing a concern shared by many: "While we must address the issue of declining birth rates, we must tread carefully. The forced mixing of bloodlines or the integration of Squibs is not the solution. We risk destabilising the core of our world—the magical essence that has sustained us for generations."

Whether these concerns will ultimately be heeded by the Ministry remains to be seen, but what is clear is that this debate will continue to divide opinions across the Wizarding world. As our government pushes forward with its progressive agenda, the question lingers: at what cost does this progress come?

The Daily Prophet will continue to follow this developing story as discussions unfold in the Ministry of Magic.

———

Regulus has felt it for months already - that the wizarding community was slowly rising against the ludicrous modernist course the Ministry had been taking for years. Jenkins had never outspokenly been a progressive, but she had mostly shown it in the room she left for modernists and even progressive terrorists. She had never condemned the Squib Rights marches, for example. Although they took place when Regulus was 9, he clearly remembered the outrage around him and the heated words by Mother at the dining table. He also remembered Sirius getting some whipping because he had threatened to participate in one of the marches during a tantrum. Another vivid memory included the dark-cloaked people taking over the house and Sirius and him being left to Kreacher's devices. It was only years after that Regulus made the connection with the happenings that had disrupted the protests - leaving three protesters and a handful of Muggles dead. It had been a cover-up of unprecedented proportions.

The same things had been happening for some years, but covertly, in the dark. Little attacks that went unnoticed. A ministry worker poisoned - an unimportant figure but having expressed sympathies for the progressives in the wrong company. Two children of Muggle parents whose names had come up at the Improper Use of Magic Office after they'd magically blew up half a barn filled with fireworks. A group of muggle lads killed - publicly claimed to be an overdose of a muggle drug of some kind to avoid questions too difficult to answer. An entire muggle family that had just dropped dead in their home…

The list was extensive, and Regulus was aware he knew only of the tip of the iceberg; the information that he'd overheard at the dinner table, or from eavesdropping on a drunk relative. He had learnt of the case of the two muggleborn children, for example, during a small party at Dreadmoor Keep - Cissy's house - over the summer. Regulus had fled the neverending stream of introductions and exchanges of pleasantries he'd been forced into by Cissy ("you *really* have to start networking") and was leaning behind one of the pillars separating the drawing room from the ballroom, when he overheard Uncle Cygnus sharing the story like an anecdote to a friend from work. They both had been roaring with laughter, choking on the reeking mead that'd gotten them in the state they were in. Regulus had been eager to hear what had happened to the childrens' parents, but Sirius had joined him (undoubtedly fleeing the same networking torture, forced into by Mother) and very aware of the scene Sirius would cause if he overheard his uncle joking about a few killed Mudblood children, had quickly disclosed the location of a secret stash of Firewhiskey to lure

him away from the drunkards.

Anyhow, it was clear the Ministry was losing its grip on the situation, while at the same time public opinion seemed to shift towards the conservatives. Regulus didn't need to finish his book by Machiavelli to know that this, for the revolutionaries, was a very favourable situation.

*****

The second Regulus got out of bed at a bloody unholy time on Saturday morning, he felt - no, he *knew* that this day was going to be horrible. He was an early riser normally; he loved the quiet of the Dungeon in the morning and preferred to read during breakfast instead of being subjected to forced conversations with his fellow Slytherins. However, since worriless sleep had been hard to come by, Regulus felt worse for wear while putting on his Quidditch kit. He briefly questioned why he bothered to get on the team at all - as if his pathetic Quidditch career was going to get him somewhere once the revolution started - but then he thought about Father who had, albeit drunk, boasted about his talents to Aunt Druella, with *pride* . It was such an unlikely event that he sometimes wondered whether it had been real at all.

He sighed, finished putting on his Quidditch kit, and silently crept out of the dorm. To be honest, not even a wizard cracker would wake his snoring dorm mates, but he really didn't feel like facing another human being, so tiptoeing it was.

Try-outs wouldn't start in another hour or so, but Regulus liked to fly a few solitary laps before all the technicalities commenced. Besides, he really hoped that the weak morning sun and the smell of freshly mowed grass would wake his senses. No matter how much he tried to close off his mind, or in case of no avail, instead open it but to happy thoughts and memories - he was still plagued by nightmares. The dreams were so vivid that every morning it would take a minute to realise that it hadn't been real, that he could just return to the harmless, simple life at Hogwarts he was about to live that day. A cold shower often helped him to partially shake off the feel of naked skin, the smell of sweat, the words that he, not by any means, seemed to be able to forget - but the feeling of disgust and fear was always there, simmering just below the surface, boiling occasionally when something set him off during the day. Thankfully, he had been able to suppress it anytime it boiled over, but it was starting to wear him out.

So, now that he was on the pitch, about to mount his broom, he felt relieved to be able to fly it all off for a while. Surely, the cold wind, the whistling wind in his ears and the adrenaline of speeding to the ground and abruptly making his way up again, would put a stop to the never-ending nagging feeling of dread.

He did some laps around the pitch, pretending to outfly an opponent in the race of catching the Snitch. He had already fakely won six battles, when he descended and jumped off his broom to take a sip of water and heard a very familiar voice.

“I know you’re a morning person, but don’t you think it’s a little pathetic to wake up this early just to spy on the opposing team, baby brother?”

Regulus turned around with a jerk and found himself face-to-face with Sirius, followed by Potter and Baiss, the Gryffindors’ Captain.

“You do realise that we’re only a little over a year apart?” Regulus shot. “If I’m a baby, what does that make you - a toddler?”

“A rather accurate description, I’d argue,” said Potter with a smirk, “but with cognitive deficits.” This earned him a playful smack on the head by Sirius.

Potter was a muscular guy whose hair always looked like it had been stuck in some kind of hurricane. Although Regulus fortunately barely knew the bloke, he could tell the kind of person he was from afar. It was all that Mother had always pressed Regulus not to be; cheerful, careless, wearing his heart on his sleeve, and, most importantly, being a blood traitor to the core.

Regulus chose to ignore the bloke. You’d have to be totally bonkers to be that cheerful so close to sunrise.

“Besides, what are you talking about?” Regulus continued coldly. “We’ve booked the pitch for try-outs.”

Baiss, smaller than his companions but perhaps twice as broad - the classic Beater-build - stepped forward. “You haven’t. *We* have booked the pitch.”

As if on cue, a large group of Slytherins made their way towards them. Among them were several players that had been part of the team the previous year, and some new people hoping they’d gain a spot on the team. The group was led by Emma Vanity, the Captain. Vanity was

one of the team's Chasers - a long, blond seventh-year that had been Captain ever since Regulus started Hogwarts. In these years, she had led Slytherin into winning the Quidditch Cup once, the other two times losing to Gryffindor.

"You guys are *really* desperate to get under our skin this early, aren't you?" she asked with an air of indifference.

"Not quite," Baiss answered. "The pitch has been booked by Gryffindor. I hope you lot are better at flying than you're at scheduling."

"This," Vanity said, showing a piece of parchment, "is the schedule in question. Guess what team has been assigned to this morning?"

"Vanity, Vanity," Sirius said with an arrogant flair. It suited him. " *This* is the schedule." He snatched a piece of parchment out of Potter's hands and held it up dramatically.

"We don't care about your piece of parchment," sneered Crow Mollett, one of the Slytherin beaters. "You can go whining in McGonnagall's office. It was booked by us first."

"It bloody wasn't-"

"- c'mon, you *know* -"

A heated argument broke out between the teams' players, until the annoyingly cheerful voice of Potter rose above them all.

"Chaps, chaps, I see only one solution - we'll just *race* for it! First team that leads by 50 points *or* catches the Snitch first, wins the pitch."

Surely, this was a very daft idea - the pitch was booked by Slytherin, so why lose valuable time chasing a team that's made an illegitimate claim to it? Regulus had secretly already wrapped his hand around his wand, ready to hex some stupid Gryffindor if necessary, but then -

"Sure, let's race," Vanity sighed. "Let's go."

*****

Vanity ended up letting the previous year's players play, only replacing the position of the two Chasers that had left Hogwarts over the summer. She'd randomly chosen the two Chasers that looked the most capable at first sight, to the dismay of the others that showed up

to try out for the vacant position.

Regulus knew it was hard for the group of Chasers to play a match without any experience together, but they were definitely better off than the Gryffindors. Baiss had ended up doing the same - filling up the positions with previous year's players as much as possible. However, the Keeper and the Seeker had been seventh-years, so two crucial positions had to be played by complete rookies. It was a shame Regulus had to look for the Snitch - he couldn't afford to lose to some amateur - for otherwise he would've enjoyed the spectacle unfolding in front of him.

In only ten minutes, Slytherin was already leading by 30 points. Baiss clearly regretted his choice for Keeper that had been unable to stop two goals by Claire Silvermire - a 6th year Slytherin that had been on the team last year as well - and a new fifth year Chaser, Cylas Coldgrave.

"Gibson, eyes on the Quaffle - NOT on the ground!" he roared angrily.

Regulus snorted and made his way to the other side of the pitch, looking around fervently in quest of the Snitch.

Clearly, his brother realised they were on the losing side, as he flew over in a desperate attempt to distract Regulus from catching the small, golden ball.

"Fancy seeing you doing something other than painting Cissy's nails," he grinned.

Regulus rolled his eyes. Pathetic. "Jealous, big brother?"

"Nah, I'm fine, I don't like red anyway."

"How un-Gryffindor of you."

Regulus was about to fly away, putting an end to this pathetic attempt to distract him, when Sirius hit a nerve.

"Do you feel *good* , Reg, standing by these bigoted, inbred imbeciles?"

Regulus snorted in disbelief. "And what does that make *you* - being their family, and all?"

"You call that brainwashed lot family?"

"You can deny it all you want, Sirius," Regulus retorted coldly, "but

you'll always share their blood, and not *theirs* ." He gestured at Potter. "You'd be wise to steer away from Mudbloods and blood traitors now that we're on the brink of revolution - "

"You really believe in all that crap, don't you?" Sirius said, sounding oddly surprised, as if it just struck him. He flew closer, a concerned look on his face. "Reg," he continued in a low voice, "I know they did some really bad things to you–"

As always, the reaction was instant and uncontrolled. It felt like someone'd punched the breath out of him. He looked at Sirius in complete fright, the blood drained from his face. How did he *dare* bring this up, here, now? They had a very clear understanding - to not breathe a word, steer any thought or conversation into the wrong direction away immediately. How he had the nerve to touch on this, at Hogwarts, with so many people around, was completely beyond him.

"I know something's happened," the complete fool continued, "I've noticed you're barely sleeping, or eating for that matter - but you… you can't put the blame on all of them–"

"*Shut. Up,*" Regulus hissed. "*Just. Shut. UP."* Never had he before felt so cold and so hot at the same time.

Sirius looked around quickly, making sure they weren't overheard. "There's always a bad apple–"

Regulus shrieked in disbelief. " *A bad apple* ? You - you - you have *no* idea what you're talking about - just -"

"If you'd just, I don't know, talk to someone -"

Regulus pulled himself together, shaking off the feeling of disgust that crept over him. "Kindly go fuck yourself, Sirius," Regulus said coldly. "Fly away before I point my wand at you."

Sirius looked at him, stunned. "You'd hex me, Reg?"

"Fuck off, *brother*."

They locked gazes. The same, grey eyes, staring in coldness.

A celebratory yell jerked them out of the stare-off back to the rest of the teams in the air.

"*Face that,* idiots!" Vanity shrieked.

Slytherin had won.

Regulus felt like he'd just lost the most important match in his life.

*****

"You look awfully distressed," Isa concluded warily when Regulus finally entered the common room after a very cold shower.

Try-outs had lasted all morning and a rather large part of the afternoon. There had been quite some students trying out for the team, and the presence of other teams and other teams' supporters in the stands that tried to disrupt most of the event had really prolonged the affair.

Regulus had been utterly distracted, playing the conversation with his brother over and over in his head, quickly transforming into other, even more unsettling scenes lodged into his brain and ultimately having his thoughts trail off to the photograph that disturbed him so deeply.

Still, Regulus could catch a Snitch in his sleep, so it had barely impacted his performance, but it had made for a rather unpleasant day so far.

He had walked back to the dorm and showered numbly, hardly processing anything that happened around him.

"Let's go for a walk," Isa said promptly, collecting her books and homework from the table. Sensing that he didn't want to be touched, she motioned Regulus out of the Dungeon without laying a hand on him. "The Lake?" she questioned. Regulus nodded. "The lake it is."

He had never told Isa about the happenings that haunted him so, that kept him up at night. He had never told anyone - there were some people, like his brother, that knew due to unfortunate events, but he had never told a single soul. Still, Isa was both clever and observant *and* she had known Regulus for years, so Regulus knew deep down that Isa probably knew a lot more than she let on, but it was a thought too heavy to bear.

As if the day wasn't already terrible enough, they managed to walk into the one person whose face Regulus fancied seeing the least. Sirius was on his way to the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall, chatting

amicably with Potter.

Their sight stopped Regulus dead in his tracks. The duo, aware of the sudden halt of tread, went silent and turned around on their heels quickly.

“Reg,” Sirius said, his voice almost a whisper. “Isadora.”

Isa positioned herself protectively between the brothers. “Sirius,” she said coldly.

“Reg–” Sirius started. Isa shook her head and motioned him to walk away. He, naturally, did not and instead closed the distance between them.

“Look out for him,” he whispered, but loud enough for Regulus to hear.

“Don’t I always?” Isa retorted coldly, her eyebrows raised. “Now off you go, chop chop.”

She waved them away and steered Regulus towards the double doors of the Entrance Hall. They were ajar, letting the September sun in.

They made their way towards the Lake with Isa filling the silence with endless chatter about trivial stuff - about her dorm mates, some funny story about one of her sisters, some news about her cousins from France… It was a long monologue, and one for which Regulus was very grateful.

They picked a spot in the weak sun and away from prying eyes and eavesdropping ears, and settled down.

“C’mere,” Isa motioned, patting her lap. Regulus obeyed and put his head on her lap, sighing deeply when she tentatively touched his hair. Sensing that it was all right, she went to gently stroke his curls. It was a matter of time before he drifted off to another dimension, in which, surprisingly, for once, there seemed to be no worries or shame.

*****

“I can’t move,” Isa groaned. “Seriously, I might explode.”

Regulus grinned. “Told you you’d better pass on the eclairs.”

“Yes, I know. You remind me every time-”

“-and you *always* completely disregard my advice.”

They both grinned contendly - after Regulus’s nap, which had taken embarrassingly long, dinner had been almost over, so they’d gone over to the kitchens instead. Naturally, the House Elves had done a brilliant job at stuffing them with any food that came to mind, including a lot of eclairs.

Isa hadn’t pried about the state she’d found him in earlier that day and instead went on like nothing had happened once he had woken up, hungry but more energetic than he’d felt for weeks.

“So, any plans for the rest of the evening?” Isa asked.

“Well, I’ve still got a lot of inches to go for Transfiguration and Potions…”

Isa nodded understandably. Considering the amount of subjects she was taking, she probably had similar plans.

“Library or common room?” she asked.

“Library, definitely,” he responded, knowing how crowded and loud the common room was likely to be on a Saturday evening. “Let’s get our stuff first.”

Taking the stairs down the Dungeon, Regulus walked into a few fellow students that did the strangest thing.

“Good luck, mate,” said some seventh-year who Regulus barely knew. He could just about dodge the clapping hand on his shoulder.

“Have fun, champ,” another sixth-year said mockingly.

“If you want me to hex anyone - anytime.”

Much the same happened to Isa.

“Good luck, darling,” some sixth-year girl said empathetically. “Don’t worry, I’m sure it won’t be too bad…”

“Too bad, Nott…”

“Nott! Have fun, they’ve even grouped you with a Mudblood of all people!”

Regulus and Isa looked at one another confused.

“What the hell are they on about?” Regulus asked.

“C’mon, something must’ve happened, surely there are some people in the common room…”

And indeed, once they entered the common room, they were practically jumped by Evan and Barty.

“Where have you been?” Evan demanded. “Why weren’t you two at dinner?”

“Yes, where *were* you?” Barty asked with a suggestive wink.

“What’s the big deal? So we skipped dinner–”

“Not just any dinner,” Evan said. “*The* A.S.S. dinner?”

“Ass?” snorted Isa. What the hell were they talking about?

“Yes, you know - the Amulgation and, oh for fuck’s sake - the unity project thing!” Evan exclaimed.

And then it struck him - the candidates and groups would be presented on Saturday, during dinner.

It was Saturday.

They just finished dinner.

Fuck.

Silence.

“So?” Regulus asked impatiently. “Who’s selected and in what groups?”

Regulus was *very* aware of the fact that if things could go two ways - it was nearly always the worst way that it went for him. That was just how it worked.

He thought about it. *Of course* they’d been chosen, that’d exclaim the stream of people and their best wishes on their way to the Dungeons.

And it shouldn’t surprise him, really. They came from the most orthodox pureblood families. Of course they’d pick them for some kind of progressive indoctrination programme. And all the trouble with Sirius…

Oh, *shit*. He must've been picked as well - and put them together in groups, trying to glue the rift between them that so well reflected the reality of society…

"I've been grouped with my brother, haven't I?" Regulus asked.

"Well…," Evan said cautiously. He handed over a piece of parchment.

The first group was Isa's. He felt a wave of pity looking at the list.

Group 1

Frank Longbottom (Gryffindor, 7th year)

Remus Lupin (Gryffindor, 5th year)

Nathaniel Davies (Ravenclaw, 6th year)

Ivy Wilde (Hufflepuff, 3rd year)

Olivia Watt (Ravenclaw, 2nd year)

Isadora Nott (Slytherin, 4th year)

He knew Longbottom - he was a Prefect. A pureblood one of the so-called Twenty-Eight; the list of oldest Pureblood families. His family was quite lowkey, though - Regulus couldn't remember his family attending the same parties and get-togethers, but he also hadn't been warned by Mother to steer away from him, so he probably wasn't a blood traitor. Remus Lupin was of course one of Sirius's best friends, a halfblood. Strange bloke, also a Prefect.
Nathaniel Davies was apparently one of the castle's most fancied blokes - perfect brown hair and green eyes that got half of the girls drooling over him. Regulus vaguely remembered someone mentioning he was a halfblood, but he didn't know for sure. The other Ravenclaw and the Hufflepuff on the list were unknown to Regulus, but seeing their very common British names, he suspected them to be Mudbloods.

Now that he'd thoroughly analysed Isa's group, he knew it was time to face reality and continue down the parchment. *Of course* , he'd be grouped with Sirius. Dumbledore would have no mercy.

He looked at the group that contained his name and concluded that, indeed, Dumbledore was a merciless bastard.

Group 5

Nadia Khan (Hufflepuff, 6th year)

Gregor Coolidge (Hufflepuff, 1st year)

Felicity Thompson (Ravenclaw, 7th year)

Regulus Black (Slytherin, 4th year)

Sabrina Selwyn (Slytherin, 4th year)

James Potter (Gryffindor, 5th year)

No Sirius Black. No, it was even worse - Regulus got *Sabrina Selwyn* and *James Potter*. Oh - and two Hufflepuffs and a first year.

Fuck.

Chapter 5: Of Marks & Leaflets

“Selwyn *and* Potter,” Regulus complained. “The thickest witch to walk the castle *and* a bloke from the biggest blood traitor families, apart from Dumbledore himself perhaps, who happens to be Sirius’s surrogate brother.”

“Don’t forget the first year Hufflepuff,” Evan grinned. “That Badger’ll definitely lead your team to victory.”

Barty snorted.

“Thompson is fit, though,” Evan analysed.

“Halfblood, unfortunately,” Barty added quickly.

“You don’t have to marry her, Barty,” Evan shot him, rolling his eyes. “There’s something called shag and shove.”

Regulus was too preoccupied by the list to think about this disgusting line of thought.

“And they *didn’t* pick my brother!”

“Surely not,” Barty said cautiously. “He won’t need… you know… any progressive thoughts…”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “You’re allowed to admit he’s been brainwashed by blood traitors, Barty.”

“The biggest of whom is grouped with you,” Evan snorted, patting Regulus mockingly on his back. “You’re officially fucked, Black.”

Although the news had been broken already a day ago, Regulus still hadn’t been able to process it and kept blurting out the same kind of thoughts randomly throughout the day. A surge of disbelief and disdain would suddenly master him and he’d shout out something involving the people he’d been grouped with, the state of Dumbledore’s psyche and the probable prospect of Mother burning down the castle with fiendfyre.

During dinner, during another of said episodes and in a subsequent quest to make it feel real and easier to accept, Regulus scanned the Great Hall for his teammates.

He looked over at the Hufflepuff table first. Nadia Khan was easy to find - one of the few Indian-looking girls at Hogwarts. There was definitely only one both a Hufflepuff and old enough to be a sixth year. There was nothing special about her. Dark eyes, dark hair in a ponytail, eating dinner with a friend quietly.

The other Hufflepuff, a first-year bearing the common name of Gregor Coolidge, would, in normal circumstances, be harder to locate. However, as Regulus trailed his gaze down to the dwarves at the left side of the table, there was one little blond guy looking at him in sheer excitement. Regulus groaned at the prospect of some overly excited first year taking this competition way too seriously.

He quickly continued his quest, now at the Ravenclaw table, where Felicity Thompson was chatting cheerfully with some friends, luckily having no eye for Regulus's investigative gaze.

Apart from Selwyn, the stupid and thick face of whom he was being confronted with on a daily basis in classes or the common room, there was just one foolish Gryffindor left.

Regulus cautiously let his gaze slide over the Gryffindor table, coming to a halt at the sight of his brother. Facing him was James Potter, taking a bite from the roast lamb on his plate, quietly listening to whatever idiotic thing Sirius probably had to say.

Then, as if he'd felt his gaze, he raised his head and locked eyes with Regulus. A pair of brown eyes, matching the colour of his wild coupe - they looked at him, piercing, questioning, as if he was looking for something. It unsettled him.

All of a sudden, Regulus seemed to wake up and yanked his eyes away from him, focusing on his food with a bit too much fascination.

*****

Dear Cissy,

How are you? I hope you're all settled back in Dreadmoor Keep? You're surely looking forward to getting your own place after the wedding, aren't you?

The first (not even) week at Hogwarts has been rather eventful. Classes are great as always, and it looks like, for the first time, we're actually having an interesting and adequate Professor for Defense. He demonstrated the Unforgivables on a sparrow in the first class - I've never seen Barty so

enthusiastic about his education before. His name is Victor Thorne. He seems sympathetic to the cause, but I've never heard of him before. Do you, or anyone you know, by any chance know of him and where his loyalties lie? I need to know whether Barty's heart is going to be broken or whether I have to arrange a wedding anytime soon.

I'm sure you've also heard of the house unity programme that Dumbledore's launched. Well, big surprise - I've been selected to compete in some kind of competition, and have been grouped with, among others, James Potter. There's also, I think, two halfbloods and two Mudbloods on my team, but I'm not entirely sure.

Participation is obligatory, but, I guess Mother could put a stop to it if she wished. Could you, by any chance, find out what Mother wants me to do? If she wishes me to compete, I will, of course, but I wouldn't mind dropping out, to be honest.

Anyhow, exciting things are happening, don't you think? I think it'll only be a matter of time before Jenkins is ousted. My mates are speculating that she'll be ousted by a revolutionary, but I think it'll be a conformist - but a hardliner, not a wuss like Jenkins. I know public opinion is shifting towards the right direction, but the establishment is still too hung up on its modernism. That modernist crook of a Leach has only been Minister for 6 years, and all those years later, we're still feeling the reverberations. I've been reading an interesting book by a Muggle political strategist, Machiavelli. You'd be astounded how much of his work is applicable to the contemporary wizarding world. I'll tell you all about it once we see each other, sometimes soon, I hope.

I hope everyone's doing well, and that we'll meet up soon,

Regulus.

*****

Another week of classes had passed, and Regulus was lying flat on his bed, hands behind his head and, unfortunately, a pair of feet prodding his shoulder. Although they were perfectly clean and pedicured - since they belonged to Isa who was very strict about that kind of thing - they were being used as a weapon every time Regulus made a joke at Isa's expense.

Isa was no stranger to Regulus's dorm, but they'd often opt for other places to hang out instead. However, the common room was swamped with people playing exploding snap and wizard's chess, and a group of seventh-years was tossing Quaffles around. They weren't on the team

though, a fact underscored by a rather alarming number of near-death experiences in a considerate short amount of time. The library wasn't an option either, since the librarian had the tendency to fire some very nasty jinxes at anyone that raised their voice a tad too loudly. Any place outside also wasn't an option since it was raining cats and dogs. Perhaps the Greenhouse was an option, but that was generally occupied by a weird combination of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws eager to test an experimental plant of some kind.

So, on nights like these, especially when nearly none of his dorm mates were around, Isa would occupy Regulus's bed.

"Mum expects me to compete," Isa sighed, looking at the ceiling in the same position as Regulus. "She says that these are 'sensitive times' and that it'd be too much of a political statement for me not to compete. And of course, she expects me to win."

Regulus nodded. "Probably a wise decision. I'm guessing the Ministry will fall anytime now, and Merlin knows what the replacement is going to be like. Better to lie low for a bit."

"Look at you, sounding all strategic and wise."

Regulus snorted. "I haven't heard from Cissy yet, though. I expect the same kind of answer."

Regulus only wrote to Mother a couple of times a year - it always took a dreadfully long time to find the right topics to discuss, the right words to phrase the right sentiments, and so on. Mother, who really wasn't one for small talk and liked to write only in case of emergencies or to berate someone, didn't seem to mind much. Besides, Cissy would pass on important information and play as some kind of intermediate in sensitive issues, as she somehow seemed to understand the workings of Mother's mind an awful lot better than her own son.

"Give me a foot rub, will you," Isa demanded suddenly, nudging his shoulder again with her feet.

"Funny."

"I'm serious."

"Me too - in your dreams and your dreams only, Nott."

"Ah, please," she begged. "My feet are killing me from all the running

from and to classes."

"I'm running just as much as you *and* train at least thrice a week, and guess what - you're not hearing me beg for a foot massage, are you?"

"I'm rubbish at them anyway," Isa retorted. "C'mon, Reg, would you rather have me ask Sable? It's the weirdest thing ever, having a House Elf touch your feet."

This earned a loud laugh from Regulus.

"And you're *very* talented in the massage department, darling," Isa continued.

"Flattery won't get you anywhere, Nott."

"It's an order, Black. How many times have I induced you into a coma with my hair-magic?"

Regulus had to admit this was true. There wasn't much more enjoyable than Isa stroking his hair, always ending in him drifting off peacefully…

He sighed. "C'mere with your filthy feet, Nott."

And so he found himself massaging Isa's feet on his bed on Friday evening when Barty and Evan bursted into the dorm.

Regulus, feeling that the scene might arouse the wrong thoughts, was about to drop Isa's foot, were it not for the fact that she'd envisaged this and quickly hissed: "Don't you dare. No more hair stroking for you, Black."

Regulus sighed in defeat and continued kneading her foot.

Barty and Evan looked rather amused at the scene in front of them.

"Nott," Evan grinned, "always a pleasure."

"Likewise," Isa answered indifferently.

"We come bearing extraordinary news!" Barty said delightedly.

"No more A.S.S.?" Regulus asked hopefully.

"Dumbledore's ousted?" Isa coined.

“Someone’s punched Potter in the face?”

“You’re marrying Thorne?”

Barty rolled his eyes. “No, have a look at this.”

He tossed a copy of the Evening Prophet towards him and Regulus snatched it out of the air in a manner you’d expect from a Seeker.

———————

Dark Mark Appears in Muggle Attack

By Aurora Wells, Crisis Reporter

In a shocking turn of events, the Dark Mark was witnessed for the first time following a brutal attack on a Muggle community last night. The incident occurred in the small village of Littleton, where several Muggle homes were destroyed and residents left in a state of panic. Eyewitnesses reported seeing the ominous green symbol in the sky, signalling the return of a dark force previously believed to be dormant. Aurors are investigating the connection between this new wave of violence and the notorious "Death Eaters," a radical group that aims to impose their extremist views upon both the magical and Muggle worlds. The Ministry of Magic has yet to issue a statement, but the appearance of the Dark Mark raises alarming questions about the safety of all communities.

———————

The rest of the page was also dedicated to the attack in some kind of manner - there was an article describing the Dark Mark and whether it’d curse anyone too close to it (the preliminary answer being ‘no’) and an article about the ‘Death Eater Conspiracy’, going into the history of the name.

“Holy shit,” Isa, who’d been curious enough to let her massage slide to lie next to him and read along.

“Told you,” Barty grinned. “About time - *action*!”

“Mark my words,” Regulus said. “The Ministry is on the verge of falling. This is *huge.*”

“You really think it’ll be a hardliner that’s going to succeed Jenkisns?” Evan asked, going back to the endless discussion about who was likely to become Minister of Magic.

“Definitely. Someone that’ll look tough, make the people feel protected… there’s too much sympathy for progressives still to install a revolutionary leader.”

“Who’s it going to be, then?” Isa wondered out loud.

“Well,” Regulus answered. “It’ll probably be someone like … Minchum or…” he looked at Barty cautiously.

“My dad,” he finished Regulus’s sentence.

“Yeah,” Regulus said awkwardly. “Minchum makes more sense, though - it’d make more sense for your dad to climb a bit higher within the Law Enforcement, but, well, you never know…”

Evan, knowing too how sensitive Barty was about his father, thankfully steered the conversation into a different direction.

“What should a leader be, though?” Evan wondered out loud. “What makes a leader, *a leader,* if you get what I mean?”

Regulus had quite some ideas about this, but chose to bite his tongue, afraid he’d overwhelm his audience with his fascination for the topic.

“You’d have to ask the expert,” Isa yawned, pointing her head at Regulus. “This nutter probably has some ideas.”

“Well, the floor is yours,” Barty pushed, gesturing to the empty floor of the dorm as if showing him a stage.

“It depends,” Regulus said, again flatly on his back, his hands a cushion under his head. He was intrigued by the topic. “It depends on society, the time, the place… So many variables. But the most important thing a leader should be able to offer would be security and stability, right? So, being able to provide security and a stable environment for its subjects. Chaos disrupts, it fragments society, it enhances anarchy… So yes, you’d want stability, safety. For that to occur, a leader should be powerful and should be able to maintain that power, to persevere in difficult times.”

“There’s people that argue that power is conveyed by the subjects to the ruler,” Isa chipped in. “Rather than forced upon the subjects from above.”

“That’s an idealistic and rather foolish approach,” Regulus countered immediately. “There’d always be defectors, there’s always people that

don't agree or people that seek power themselves - once you give them room, you can kiss your reign goodbye."

"So, it's fear that rules?" Barty asked, clearly interested.

"It's always fear that rules," Regulus nodded. He was still staring at the ceiling, ideas about power flipping through his mind. "A leader should be pragmatic - you know, he'd have to take into account the reality in which he reigns and adapt to it - but holding on to power is the ultimate goal, and any idealism or morality has to make way."

"Brilliant," Evan breathed. "You should go into politics. You know what you're talking about. You'd be brilliant. I feel it."

Regulus snorted, but quickly muffled the sound with his hands when he realised that Isa was fast asleep next to him. He smiled. He'd forgotten that she always slept with her mouth open. It was an endearing sight.

Regulus softly tried to nudge her awake. "Isa," he whispered. "Ies… wake up."

"Let the girl sleep, Black," Barty yawned.

Regulus snorted. "And have her wake up in a dorm with five blokes? The rumours will be *formidable*."

"Who cares," Barty shrugged, and then his face broke into a mischievous grin. "Besides, it'd be nice and cosy, the two of you-"

"That's disgusting, even for your standards, Crouch," Regulus shot him appalled. "That'd be like… incest."

Barty laughed and jumped into his bed. "Suit yourself."

Regulus did manage to wake Isa up in the end, who seemed to agree with Barty and wouldn't have minded sleeping over. Still, Regulus was very aware of the gossip machine at Hogwarts and knew that certain things were expected of Isa, being the eldest Nott. Also, he felt that Isa didn't quite understand his dorm mates' likely thoughts when witnessing a girl sleeping over.

And it'd be better anyway - to not have to explain the endless tossing and turning and screaming and shuddering he was likely to do in the darkest hour of the night.

*****

The attacks on the Muggles were the only thing people seemed to talk about over the weekend. It didn't do the relations between the Slytherins and, well, all the other Houses, any good. The tension was palpable, and had already mounted into a couple of incidents involving rather nasty jinxes and a continuous stream of cursing back and forth. Moreover, students from other houses would give Slytherins a wide berth and generally move in pairs or small groups down the castle now.

Regulus couldn't blame them. It was no secret that the overwhelming majority of the Slytherins supported the attacks. It was the House of Salazar Slytherin that was at the heart of the revolution - it'd take nothing but the opening salvo for all of his House's years to unite under the banner of the revolution. It was imminent, they were close, they were *ready* .

All these developments coincided - probably on purpose - with the announcement of the next steps into the idiotic A.S.S.-programme.

" *Shared dinner?* " Isa exclaimed in disbelief, fiercely shaking a leaflet in her hands, as if she was punishing it - which she, in some strange way, probably was. She threw a pile of similar leaflets on the table.

It was Monday evening, and although the week had just started, Regulus already felt behind with his homework. He was writing an essay for Transfiguration, Defense and Potions at the same time - occupying the majority of a table in the common room, leaving only a little part for Severus and his Charms coursework. Severus took fewer subjects and didn't have to surrender two evenings and a morning on the weekend for Quidditch, so the git had only one essay left to complete.

"Let me see," Evan said, grabbing one of the leaflets. He was working on his essay for Transfiguration at the next table. It involved a lot of staring and not a lot of writing.

His eyes grew the size of Quaffles. "*Every Friday? Every Friday*?"

"*Every Friday*?" Barty asked, stunned, also grabbing a leaflet.

"*Every Friday*?" Severus repeated.

Regulus sighed and took one of the leaflets, which he looked over quickly.

“Yes - *every Friday*,” he said mockingly.

“*Every Friday,* we’ll be forced to sit with students from other houses,” Isa continued, still baffled. “There’ll be no House tables, just … tables.’

“But,” Evan said, reading on, “the first, second and third years will sit apart from the others.”

“Yes,” Isa said sarcastically, “because apparently differentiating based on Houses is wrong, but age discrimination is perfectly fine!”

“I think it’s to avoid first-year Hufflepuffs from fainting when they’re seated next to any of us,” Evan snickered.

This was probably true. Nothing better than a couple of orthodox, pureblood descendants to send off first-years to the infirmary.

“Oh, and guess what,” Isa continued her rampage. “All the ‘Unity Champions’--” Regulus winced at the unfortunate terminology “--will meet Wednesday evening to get instructions and to ‘officially kick-off the project’.” She threw another leaflet at the table, more or less covering the same information as Isa had just conveyed.

“Really, how is it that *none* of you are participating?” Isa asked. “From all the Slytherins they could’ve picked, they ended up with Reg, me and both the Selwyns?”

“Technically, there’s more,” Amaryllis Greengrass said matter-of-factly. She and Melania Ackworth had joined them. Regulus hoped they wouldn’t attract Selwyn - as she was the only remaining fourth-year girl. “There’s Vance, Flint, Silvermire, Talkalot, and a couple more.”

“Still,” Regulus came to the defence of Isa, “we have Rosier in fourth year, Mulciber and Avery in fifth - hell, we have Dolohov and Lestrange in seventh year!”

“Don’t forget lovely Crouch, here, who’s gone completely gaga as well,” Evan grinned. Barty threw the pile of leaflets at him.

“Perhaps they’re considered beyond repair,” Greengrass said, cheerfully as ever.

Isa and Regulus locked gazes and laughed. “And then try with a Nott and a Black?”

“Well, they have one Black already, so there must be a weak spot somewhere,” Amaryllis continued matter-of-factly.

Regulus’s friends immediately sensed the tension from Regulus and decided to skip this comment completely.

“I am a bit surprised that they’re letting you compete, though,” said Severus.

Regulus shrugged. “Sensitive political climate, I guess.”

Those were the exact words that Cissy had used in her reply. It was a nice letter - she seemed to agree with Regulus’s political analysis, and conveyed the message of Mother that he was expected to compete, not mingling with scum more than strictly necessary for the assignments and to keep his eyes and ears open at all times. Unsurprisingly, he was also pressed to report back any fishy stuff immediately. Still, the most interesting part about the letter was that Cissy and Lucius apparently knew Thorne, and that he was, indeed, sympathetic to the revolution.

They’d only had two follow-up classes, during which they had wrapped up the theoretical part of the Unforgivables and had started theory on duelling. Interesting material, but not as exciting as the first lesson. Regulus had an inkling that Thorne seemed just a tad too interested in him and his group of friends, but the feeling had been so subtle, that he had kept it to himself. There was something about him, though, and it bugged him he couldn’t put into words - or clear thoughts, for that matter - what.

*****

Growing Frustration with Ministry’s Response to Rising Threats

By Elara Fawley, Senior Correspondent

The magical community's frustration with the Ministry of Magic's handling of escalating threats is intensifying. Recent events, including a string of violent attacks attributed to the newly identified "Death Eaters," have sparked widespread concern. These radicals, who seek to "purify" the wizarding world through terror and oppression, have proven to be a formidable and dangerous force.

Citizens are increasingly questioning whether the Ministry’s response is sufficient to address this growing menace. The Caldwell family, known for their moderate yet assertive stance on magical issues, voiced their

discontent in a recent interview: "We are witnessing a rise in violence and instability that demands a stronger, more decisive response. The Ministry's current measures are not enough to counteract these extremists. It's clear that a more robust approach is needed to ensure the safety of our community."

The rise of the Death Eaters, named for their extreme and violent ideologies, has left many feeling vulnerable. The group's tactics include intimidation and aggression aimed at both Muggle and magical communities, creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Despite the gravity of the situation, notable pureblood families have remained silent, their positions on the issue unclear. This silence has only fueled speculation and debate about the Ministry's effectiveness and the need for reform.

As tensions mount, the question of whether the Ministry can adequately protect its citizens and restore order remains a pressing concern. The growing call for a more forceful approach to dealing with these extremists highlights the broader unease within the magical society and sets the stage for ongoing discussions about the future of magical governance and security.

*****

Wednesday evening came too soon, and it was with much reluctance that Regulus hovered at the door belonging to the girls' dormitory.

Not much later, Isa came out, hooking her arm in his. "Let's get this shit-show on the road," she grunted. "Sabrina wanted to walk with me, but I think I managed to dodge her." She looked around warily. "Let's go quickly, though."

They were to meet in the Great Hall, and that was pretty much all the information that had been enclosed. Regulus couldn't help notice that Isa was fidgeting annoyingly with her hands.

"Are you *nervous* , Nott?" he snorted.

Isa shot him a glare. "Am *not.*"

"Then why so jittery?"

"I just don't like this at all, Reg," she said quietly. "Merlin knows what we're up to, in groups with all kinds of people that hate us."

"It'll be alright. No way that they'll let something happen to you. They

know your dad would single handedly off the entire staff."

It was true - Magnus Alaric Nott was a frightening man. He was charismatic, handsome and humorous, but also strict, powerful and very frightening once you got on his wrong side. Frankly, it had been a rather bold decision to have his daughter compete in the first place. No wonder Dumbledore had been a reckless Gryffindor.

The door to the Great Hall was ajar, and Regulus pushed it open carefully. Two of the four tables were pushed to the side of the hall, leaving only two long tables in the middle. There were six signs carrying a number spread out on either of the tables, indicating where the groups were ought to sit. No one was sitting, though - the students that had already entered the hall were just hovering awkwardly, sticking close to the people that were familiar. Regulus intended to do the same.

Eventually, the doors to the hall closed once all the students, Dumbledore and all the Heads of Houses had arrived.

The students were still dispersed in little groups, looking at Dumbledore who had sat down at his regular chair at the staff table.

"Good evening, House Unity Champions," he greeted the students warmly. Regulus heard Isa curse something under her breath in response to this idiotic term and grinned.

"May I ask you to take a seat at the table - the number indicating which group is to sit where."

Regulus shot Isa an exasperated gaze and reluctantly trudged towards the middle section of the right table.

Four students were ahead of him. Khan - the 6th year Hufflepuff - and Potter were sitting next to each other, facing Thompson - the 7th year Ravenclaw - and Selwyn across the table. Fate had apparently determined that Regulus walked to the table on the right side, meaning he had to sit at the side of Thompson and Selwyn. To be honest - he didn't know who he'd voluntarily chosen to sit with - Selwyn or Potter. One was as bad as the other.

Regulus settled down on the bench, nodding at his group mates in greeting, and then focused his gaze on the Headmaster.

"Thank you — yes. Well, I believe you are in all likelihood very curious about what lies ahead of you."

Regulus looked at Isa's group at the left table. She was sitting next to two younger girls, the three blokes across the table hanging on every word that came out of the Headmaster's mouth.

"As you know, the Amulgation and Socialisation Scheme is a multi-year project. The first year for you specifically, that we are launching tonight, will be dominated by a competition - the prize of which will be announced in due time."

Sure, let students race against each other for an entire year without even knowing what for.

"You will compete in three assignments. The first assignment will be disclosed tonight and will take place before Christmas break. The second assignment, of which details will be shared in due course, takes place before Easter Break. The last assignment takes place at the end of term – after the exams."

To Regulus's surprise, Thompson shot her hand into the air.

"Yes, Ms. Thompson?" Dumbledore asked.

"Thank you, Headmaster. How are we expected to prepare for any of the assignments, especially the last one - being so close to the exams - when we already have so much on our plates with N.E.W.T.s or O.W.L.s…"

Typical. A Ravenclaw and her exams.

"I understand the concerns," Dumbledore said. "We've decided to bring the exams forward, leaving two weeks between the end of exams and the final assignment to prepare. Your participation in the project will, naturally, also be taken into account by examiners. I do believe that none of you have to worry about your exams."

Regulus looked at Sabrina Selwyn sceptically. He was wondering if she could even cast a simple summoning charm. *Some* had something to worry about.

"The first assignment will be the Enchanted Relay - the first team that passes all tasks, wins the assignment. Naturally, as it is a relay, one team member's task has to be completed before another member can continue. Professor McGonagall has been so kind as to make a leaflet explaining the assignment and its details."

As if on cue, Regulus and Isa interlocked gazes. Isa shot him an

annoyed look and mouthed ‘ *another leaflet* ’. Regulus snorted. A bit too hard, as it was met with a questioning look from his group mates.

“Let me seize the opportunity to remind you, once again, that this programme has been brought to life with very good reasons. It is especially in times like these that we need to overcome our differences and grow closer to each other - please do not take this competition and its objectives lightly. Now, as Professor McGonagall has distributed the leaflets, you may take some time to talk it through and discuss plans on how to take it from here.”

Regulus turned towards his group and took a leaflet. An awkward silence lay over the table, with the annoying first-year looking excitedly from teammate to teammate. The rest look rather bored.

Looking like he may burst, the Hufflepuff eventually blurted out, “Oh, I am *so* excited I’m grouped with you!”

Regulus had a hard team finding out who he was actually referring to, since his gaze kept on jumping from one to the other without control.

“With *James Potter*!” he eventually explained enthusiastically. “You’re the best Chaser Hogwarts has seen for *years* , well, that’s what they all say, innit? I don’t know much about Quidditch, to be honest. And apparently you’re *very* smart too, always top of your class, and a *master* pranker— ”

Potter seemed utterly uncomfortable with Coolidge’s arsekissing. He bared his teeth in an awkward smile that didn’t suit him.

Regulus, pleased with Potter’s discomfort, snorted.

The downside of this was that Coolidge immediately snapped his gaze to him, “And *you*, you’re Regulus Black.”

“Really?” Regulus asked. “I had no idea.”

Now it was Potter’s turn to snort.

“Yes, you’re an incredible Seeker - again, that’s what they’ve told me, I don’t know much about it. And *you, you* are Felicity Thompson.”

Regulus, in an attempt to ignore Coolidge’s weird outburst of praise for all his individual teammates, picked up a leaflet and read it through, closing out all noise around him.

The first assignment would take place on the last Monday before Christmas Break. Just prior to the assignment they would be informed about the individual tasks, and apparently they had to choose who was to complete which task beforehand. There were also two "passes" in which a teammate could help another teammate out. It'd probably be fairly easy - they had a sixth-year, a seventh-year Ravenclaw and Potter - bloody annoying, cheerful and all that other crap, but Coolidge had been right that the bloke was widely considered intelligent. It'd probably be child's play.

"It says we're expected to meet every week," Khan said warily, snapping Regulus back to the table. She was reading the backside of the leaflet.

Regulus choked on his breath. "*What for* ?"

"We have to 'identify our weaknesses' and work together to improve them - if you suck at Potions, you'd have to work on that with someone who's good at it, and so on…"

"So, we're expected to just… randomly 'improve' things without knowing what we actually need to do during the assignment?" Thompson asked, surprised.

"Fun … making bricks without straw," Potter said.

"We are making bricks?" Selwyn asked. It was the first time that Regulus heard the girl speak that night. Her voice was annoying and unkind and reminded him once again why he thoroughly disliked her, especially when it came with the dumb and mean expression on her face.

Potter raised his eyebrows questionably, probably waiting for her to say something that indicated she hadn't been serious.

Obviously, that didn't happen.

"No err… you mean – just letting us work blindly, and all…"

"*Blindly* ?" Selwyn asked. "We're to do the assignments blindly?"

Potter looked at his teammates in a plea for help. Regulus said back with a smug grin and decided to leave Potter to his own devices and watch the scene unfold in front of him. It was a shame he hadn't brought snacks.

“No,” Potter retorted slowly, “I mean - we’re just, you know, left in the dark-”

“We’ll complete them *in the dark*?”

Regulus grinned. This was marvellous. Pathetic, but marvellous.

“*No,* no, I mean – we just have to, you know, work with nothing, apparently.”

“We are allowed to use our wands, right?” she asked, the panic evident in her annoying voice.

“Yes, obviously, but they haven’t given us much information to go on, have they?” Potter continued, ruffling his hair in frustration that he was unable to get through the girl’s thick skull.

Why the bloke kept on responding was beyond him, frankly. Regulus would’ve just let her stew in her misunderstanding. It would’ve been funny, her panicking until Christmas thinking that she had to complete some kind of assignment blind, in the dark and wandless. Oh, and involving the making of bricks.

Apparently Khan felt sorry for her teammate and took over the conversation. “I think we’ll just have to think about regular things that could form an obstacle - you know, plants, riddles, perhaps some animals, wards that we’ll have to break and all. It’ll be alright, we have plenty of time.”

Thompson nodded in agreement. “*Every* week until Christmas, that’ll be enough to brush up on things…”

Regulus looked warily at Selwyn. He was quite positive that even a decade of ‘brushing up’ wouldn’t do the trick for her.

In the end, after a lot of back and forth due to quidditch training schedules and Charms and Herbology clubs, they had agreed on meeting every Tuesday night in one of the Charms classrooms.

Coolidge was obviously delighted. “And in case I don’t understand my homework, I’ll be able to ask you!” He exclaimed, pointing at his team members once they all rose from their seats.

“Yes, sure,” Potter answered awkwardly.

“Great, this is shaping up to be worse than all previous years’ Defence

classes combined," Regulus complained in a whisper.

Apparently not silently enough, as Potter had overheard.

"Could be worse… Selwyn could be in charge of organising us."

Regulus couldn't suppress the snort coming out of his nose.

Chapter 6: Of Unity & Duels

The first month at Hogwarts flew by - probably due to the packed schedule and all the extracurricular things that Regulus was forced into.

It was safe to say that the A.S.S.'s first mixed dinner had been a complete fiasco - at least in the teachers' opinion.

As to be expected, the prospect of having to mingle with other Houses under the banner of 'Inter-house Unity', had greatly divided the House of Salazar Slytherin - the irony of which hadn't gone past Regulus.

Generally, his fellow Slytherins' reactions fell within the lines of three categories. First, there were the Slytherins that couldn't care less, either deliberately or because they were oblivious. Then there were the Slytherins that secretly looked forward to this measure, although they didn't dare saying it aloud - this was especially the case with some third-years. Regulus had even overheard someone chatting excitedly about dining with older Gryffindors, but he had shut up quickly at the sight of Regulus. Then there were the Slytherins that were dead against Inter-House unity of any sort. This was either expressed by planning to go on a strike and eating in the Kitchens instead, or to attend dinner with the goal of disrupting the entire affair.

Oh, and perhaps there was a separate category for Regulus - for the ones that didn't really care but were present for the mere sake of entertainment.

That is why, on Friday evening, Regulus sat down at the table that was normally Slytherin's, with a content sigh. He noticed that, barring some Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, his fellow students generally did the same; sitting down at their regular table. This secretly disappointed him, because he'd fantasised about the idea of Sabrina Selwyn sitting next to some Mudblood - Selwyn too thick to think of a jinx and the Mudblood, being the Muggleborn, throwing her a nice punch in the face. It'd be brilliant.

So, Regulus poured himself some soup and was about to ask his friends about their classes that day, when he overheard Slughorn directing some students to different tables. A couple of third-years ended up with some Ravenclaws and instead a few Hufflepuffs reluctantly nudged towards their vacant seats. He saw that Silvermire,

one of Slytherin's Chasers, was to settle down at the Hufflepuff table with her friends, and Gryffindor's Captain, Baiss, and consorts were directed to the Ravenclaw table.

Then, just as Regulus observed that apparently the teachers didn't dare to go to the lengths of throwing Slytherins and Gryffindors together, Slughorn did something that was both utterly idiotic and potentially hilarious. He steered Antonin Dolohov and Rabastan Lestrange to the seats next to Sirius Black and his friends. Regulus didn't know what was worse - Dolohov within a radius of less than two feet from James Potter, or Lestrange across the table of that Mudblood friend of Severus.

Regulus just couldn't look away.

"Oeh," Isa said, as if in pain. She was looking at the spectacle as well. "That's *bold*."

"Three galleons that at least three at that table end up in the hospital wing," Evan said with a smirk.

"Who's out first, you think?" Barty chipped in.

"Potter, definitely. Dolohov and Lestrange are no joke," Evan said.

He was right. Regulus had known them all his life; not very well, but he'd come across them at parties, gatherings, dinners and the like. The two being of two orthodox pureblood families made them natural allies with the Blacks. Still, Rabastan was very much like his brother, who was married to Bellatrix and you'd have to be a special kind of malicious to be able to wed her - so Regulus generally tried to steer away from him. Dolohov wasn't much different. He had a mean streak and a disturbing fondness for fire.

"And don't forget they're seventh-years," Isa added.

"Two years of jinxes ahead of them," Barty said.

Well, the jinxes that Dolohov and Lestrange had probably learned in the past seven years would count for a lifetime, Regulus was sure.

The four of them were so engrossed by the scene at the Gryffindor table that they hadn't paid attention to some seventh-year Gryffindors joining them at the table.

Only when one of them started to speak, Regulus realised that Frank

Longbottom - the Prefect -, Alice Fortescue and someone he didn't recognise, were digging into potatoes, shepherd's pie and lamb chops. They looked way too comfortable in the figurative belly of the beast.

"I must've missed this - *who* put these two at the Gryffindor table and why haven't they left already?" Fortescue asked.

"It was Slughorn," Isa answered.

"Ah, that explains a lot," Fortescue retorted. "Afraid he'll kick them out of the Slug Club if they don't comply."

"'Unity dinner'," Isa mocked. "More like Dumbledore's latest attempt to have the castle blown up before desert."

They all relocated their gaze to the Gryffindor table. Dolohov and Lestrange were stiffly eating their dinner, as far away as physically possible from Sirius and his friends. Sirius's eyes were shooting daggers - Regulus knew his brother well enough to know that he was pondering which hex would have the most phenomenal effect in case things escalated. He, after all, had a knack for dramatics and had a pretty bad temper. He was like Mother in that way.

The Mudblood across the table looked very uncomfortable, fiddling with her dark red hair and looking warily at Potter, who was - of course, his cheerful and comfortable self, like he wasn't probably about to be hexed into next year by two Death-Eaters-to-be.

"Who do you think they'll get first, Potter or your brother?" Evan asked with a serious tone.

"Don't underestimate those two," Fortescue said defensively. Foolish Gryffindor, even defending her House mates surrounded by their archenemies. "They always have a trick up their sleeves."

In any case, for quite a while, it didn't look like something was going to happen at all - something for which Regulus was both happy and sad. It'd be nice to see some action, but it'd probably also involve the murder of his brother.

But then, Regulus noticed his brother's eyes go dark, the Mudblood stiffen, and Potter's expression go from unnaturally relaxed to repulsed.

Regulus tried very hard to overhear their conversation, but there was too much noise around him from chatting students, scraping forks and

clanking plates. If they could just shut up for a couple of -

"*Take that back!* " Sirius screamed. It did shut up the people around him - about bloody time.

“You see? Once a blood traitor, always a blood traitor,” Lestrange sneered.

“Now, now,” Potter added good-humouredly. “All that talk about blood - after all that inbreeding, you must be wondering if your pure blood is still red… or just thinning into sludge.”

Sirius was just able to throw him an approving ‘nice one, mate’, before hexes started flying. Potter was just in time to duck a flash of purple from Dolohov, which ended up in the roast chicken on the next table, exploding over a large group of students. An off tune choir of shrieks and yells broke out in response. In the meanwhile, Sirius threw a hex at Lestrange, who managed to shield it, but also knocked over two large bottles of pumpkin juice, ending up over a couple of Gryffindors. And then it was just pandemonium - hexes, shrieking students, flying potatoes, students covered in salad, crying girls with gravy in their hair…

Like all good things in the world that come to an end, the chaos was eventually subdued by Slughorn and McGonagall that had rushed over from the staff table and broke up the fight. They forced the four students out of the Hall, Slughorn steering Dolohov and Lestrange, and McGonagall followed by Sirius and Potter.

“I hope they’re expelled - even if it means Dolohov and Lestrange are expelled too,” Barty said with a grin.

“It’d give us the good seats in the common room,” Evan nodded. That was true - Dolohov and Lestrange tended to occupy the best sofa in the common room; far enough from the crowd to be able to have a decent conversation, but on a slightly raised platform enabling a good view of the entire room, and at a perfect distance from the fireplace.

“I really don’t know what else they did expect,” Isa thought out loud. “Mixing Slytherins and Gryffindors is one thing, but seating the four of them together? That’s just *begging* for someone to be killed.”

*****

It turned out that none of them were expelled, but had been given detention every night a week and had been deducted seventy-five

points each. It was a harsh measure, but it was to be expected since they had disrupted the first mixed dinner - Regulus was certain that the teachers wanted to establish strict rules in order to avoid any future dissonance.

For Regulus, it meant that the meeting with his A.S.S.-group was postponed until after the next weekend, because Potter was too busy scrubbing the Trophy room or doing some other ridiculous chore set by Filch.

Regulus was glad, since it gave him an extra night to get through his homework. He liked all his classes - he had a, according to many friends and relatives unnatural, fondness of reading. This generally meant that he'd read all his course books already over the holiday, familiarising him with the subjects to be discussed throughout the year. After this, it was just a matter of refreshing and applying the material. Not many people around him levelled with him in this regard - as he wasn't placed into Ravenclaw - and he had to endure being called some version of a swot on a daily basis. The only people that came close were Severus and Isa, who probably had never come to class unprepared and spent much of their class free time in the library as well. Evan and Barty would often make fun of them - preferring to discuss Quidditch and girls, fantasising about a party that'd be coming up and putting in the bare minimum necessary to pass their courses. Barty's bar lay a bit higher than Evan's, seeing he had a father to impress, but he didn't go as far as sweating to excel at something.

Which made his new fascination with Defence Against the Dark Arts very out of the ordinary.

He had finished the course's book (which much have been a first), he wrote essays five inches longer than necessary and, on this particular Wednesday morning, Regulus found him in the library, a pile of books tucked under his arm, a roll of parchment freshly inked on top of it and this all *before* classes had even started.

"Pinch me," Isa said. "Barty in the library? At eight in the morning?"

Before Regulus could answer, the scene got even more absurd when Evan stepped from behind a bookshelf, holding a book open in his hand and seeming thoroughly absorbed by it.

"No, this must be the End of Times," Isa said, stunned.

"Morning to you too, Nott," Evan grinned from above his book. "What

are you two doing here?"

"This question should be reversed," Regulus answered dryly. "We tend to come here often- but you two - did it perhaps *just* cross your mind that the castle holds a library?"

"Ha ha," Evan retorted sarcastically. "We were looking at some stuff for Defence."

"Oooh," Isa exclaimed, "well that explains it. You're here in another attempt to kiss some buttocks."

"Nothing better than a good deal of sycophancy to get you up and going in the morning," Regulus smirked.

"Yes, make fun of us all you want but we're bound to start some interesting stuff in class," Barty shot. "Thorne said we'd be starting duelling soon, so we'd like to go to class prepared today."

"Yes, duelling is very much a skill to be learnt from books," Isa noted.

"Now, Isa, don't discourage them," Regulus added quickly. "It took them more than three years to find their way to the library, don't ruin it now."

*****

After a block of Transfiguration, the four of them made their way towards Barty's favourite class, him and Evan quickly occupying seats in front of the room and reserving two for Isa and Regulus. Melania and Amaryllis were behind them, starting a conversation about something dull with Isa while Regulus scanned the oddly empty classroom.

There was nothing on the walls - no posters, pictures or anything. There was just Thorne's desk in front of the rest of the room, and rows of tables and chairs designated for the students. It could've been any classroom, nothing indicated it was here where one of the most interesting subjects was being taught.

Thorne entered the classroom as authoritatively as ever, the signal for the students to take their books and quills out of their backs if they hadn't done so already.

"You can put the books away," Thorne said. "Today's lesson will be a practical one."

Barty and Evan almost jumped off their chairs in excitement.

“You think they peed their pants?” Isa whispered.

Regulus snickered.

“Now, who can tell me the basic rules of duelling?”

Some Gryffindor girl was very eager to answer. “The duellists have to bow before the duel starts, and there’s a sign marking the start.”

Thorne nodded. “Yes, it usually starts at the count of three - this ensures a fair start for the opponents. Any more rules?”

No one answered.

“Well, there are some unwritten rules,” Thorne continues, “that I’d like to make written rules in my classroom. One of these is to *not* strike an opponent in the back. The same applies for opponents that are disarmed, knocked down or surrender. I want you to practise disarming, or harmless spells that stop your opponent from casting a spell at you. So no nasty jinxes, no injuries!”

“Bugger,” Barty complained.

They were told to pair up and, once Thorne got rid of all the chairs and tables, to start duelling. The professor walked around, providing assistance when necessary and correcting some students’ spells. In no time, the classroom was filled with the sound of spells, jinxes and laughter, and colourful sparks erupting from students’ wands.

Isa and Regulus had a lot of fun just trying to fire stupid jinxes at each other, occasionally unable to block them due to a fit of laughter.

“Oh, you stupid, snobby son of a–,” Isa roared when Regulus had managed to hit her with a bat-bogey hex. She tried to fight the bats coming out of her nose to no avail, and then quickly undid the spell with her wand.

Regulus barked in laughter. “Those bats look ravishing on you, Nott —”

He was cut off by a flick of Isa’s wand that resulted in a swarm of white birds making their way towards his hair.

Isa roared with laughter as Regulus tried to undo the spell, while the birds started to pick his curls. Eventually he managed to vanish the

flock of birds, shooting Isa a sarcastic smile in return.

He raised his hand in order to retaliate, but was cut short by Thorne ordering all the students to gather in front of the classroom.

“Well, that was fun,” Thorne said. The word ‘fun’ sounded unnatural coming from his mouth. The chap didn’t look like someone having fun very often. “In the real world, it will be different, obviously. It won’t be funny jinxes and spells, but nasty, dark magic that targets you in a duel. There won’t be courtesy - they *will* target you with your back turned, there will be no laughing then.” The whispers and silent laughter died out, making the excitement and attentiveness in the air palpable. Thorne had every student’s undivided attention. Regulus was wondering who Thorne referred to with ‘they’. Aurors? Death Eaters?

“Now, I was impressed with the wand work by quite a few of you. I’d like to call one of you up front, to demonstrate a duel to your peers - a duel… with me.”

Regulus knew it before it happened. He felt the always burning eyes of his Professor in the classroom, during meals in the Great Hall. It was subtle, but his eyes would always linger just a tad too long, his gaze a bit too piercing. Regulus had a knack for making himself invisible - something that went hand in hand with antennae to detect any suspicious attention. And he didn’t understand why, but he knew he was of interest to the Professor, so he knew instantly that he wouldn’t miss out on the opportunity of duelling him.

“Now, Mr. Black, if you’d be so kind as to assist me in this demonstration…”

Regulus let out the suck of breath he’d apparently been holding in. Barty whistled in excitement, and Evan’s grin was so wide Regulus thought the corners of his mouth would crack.

“Of course, Professor,” Regulus answered stiffly. He made his way to the front of the classroom, feeling oddly exposed in front of all his year’s Slytherins and Gryffindors.

“Now, I will naturally match my wand work with the level of a fourth-year,” Thorne clarified. “It wouldn’t be a fair duel otherwise. Mr. Black here looked quite competent with his wand, though, so it’ll be fun.” He moved his gaze to Regulus. “Feel free to use any spell of jinx that comes to mind, though. The ultimate goal of this duel will be to demonstrate how to stand your ground - and, in the best case, disarm

the opponent." He grinned. "No need to harm each other."

Any spell or jinx… Regulus was sure that there were some spells in Regulus's repertoire that Thorne wouldn't appreciate him using in front of a group of naive fourth-years.

It is not like he duelled on a daily basis - but duelling in one way or another had always been a great part of his life, although mostly in unserious, entertaining ways. It'd be the way to solve a quarrel between family members, it'd be an entertaining way to end the night when his uncle and father were completely plastered and overestimated their magical competences even if they could barely walk. Sure, there were some nasty duels that he had witnessed - nasty but not too serious in the case of his brother and many family members, or nasty and more serious between his cousins. In any way, casting spells back and forth was a part of life, and Regulus was observant and eager to learn.

It was also in many of their duels - in which they'd be forced by their uncles for entertainment reasons - that the main differences between Regulus and Sirius would show: Sirius with big gestures and dramatics, Regulus awaiting and therefore often more effective. Regulus had a talent for observing under great pressure, even if his attention was drawn to something else in the meanwhile.

Still, duelling Thorne was no breeze, especially not in front of an audience that 'awed', 'ouched', 'yessed' and 'oeeefed' along. It was distracting and highly irritating.

After a bow, Thorne had started with a simple Expelliarmus, but he had pronounced it slow enough to give Regulus time to block it - a deliberate choice, Regulus was sure, because it would be very dull for a duel to end within a second with the teacher disarming the student. Regulus answered with a Leg-Locker curse, but it was blocked before he could even finish saying the incarnation. And so it went for quite some while - *Petrificus Totalus* was followed by *Protego*, then the Bag-Bogey shielded by another charm, then Expelliarmus was ducked, a Sponge-Knees was deflected by a sudden brick that Thorne had conjured, and on they went.

After some fifteen minutes, Regulus was getting tired - and that was telling, seeing the Quidditch schedule he was subjected to. He was fit, in shape, and still he felt like he'd been running multiple laps around the pitch. He would have to take a different tack - but he was not sure which. While blocking another disarming spell, Regulus realised that

Thorne didn't have a distinguishable style. That was a forte; an opponent always striking from the same angle or with the same spell was easier to defuse due to the pattern. But Thorne had no pattern, his wand work was completely random - *bollocks*.

Then it crossed his mind… He was just in time to duck a tickling spell and then returned to his train of thought… What if *he* was unpredictable? If Thorne didn't see it coming, it would be harder to block. Regulus tried to be inconsistent - strike from a sudden angle, duck another way, but it was all to no avail. Thorne reacted swiftly, he left no room for Regulus to work out his plan.

And then the realisation almost smacked him in the face. There was a way… It was difficult, but there was a way… but he would have to double the distraction just in case. Strike *without* him knowing but also seemingly strike with something else.

He had done it before - it'd take a lot of concentration. He would have to imagine it, the stunned expression on Thorne's face, the feeling of his own hands around the teacher's wand once it'd flown into his direction… And mouthing something else completely, just a tad later to ensure that Thorne would anticipate this, and not something else… It'd be hard, but not impossible - he was familiar with controlling his mind, his thoughts, his feelings - he had learnt the advantages, no, the *necessity* of controlling his mind from a very young age, he'd learnt it the hard way. It'd be just like that…

So, he ducked another spell, and saw it happening in his mind before it actually took place - the Expelliarmus fired at his teacher, disarming him, leaving his wand flying into his pupil's hands. And while the vision played out in front of his eyes, he pronounced a simple tickling spell, but not synchronically with the *Expelliarmus* that truly occupied his mind and had so just a bit longer.

And then it happened - like any normal Expelliarmus would have done, the wand flew out of Thorne's hands and blew the owner backwards, although faintly. It wasn't a very powerful performance, apparently.

And although not powerful, *it worked* .

Regulus was as stunned as, well, anyone else in the room. Victor Thorne was looking surprised at the thick, wooden wand now in Regulus's hand. Regulus grew suddenly very aware of all the students in the classroom, looking at him in complete awe. He felt that the

entire room had sucked in a breath in surprise, and only Evan's *'wow*', some Gryffindors, '*holy fuck!*' and Barty's *'no bloody, fucking way*', filled the air of silence.

Regulus felt utterly awkward with Thorne's wand in his hands and quickly returned it, looking at him apologetically.

"Sorry, Professor, I shouldn't–"

"You did exactly what you were asked to do, Mr. Black," Throne interrupted him. "Thirty points to Slytherin!"

The Slytherins in the crowd cheered loudly.

With the flick of a wand, he repositioned all the tables and chairs, motioning the students to sit down. Regulus did so slowly, sitting in the front, his eyes focused on the empty blackboard in an attempt to avoid Thorne's gaze.

"What Mr. Black did here, is exactly what you need to do in a real duel - find the opponent's weakness. In this case, it was my unawareness of Mr. Black being able to perform non-verbal spells - something quite remarkable for a fourth-year. He used it to his advantage, instead pretending to cast another spell a bit later, and was thus able to disarm me. Now, it's already time for your next class, but we will definitely come back to duelling - we still have some specific curricular topics to go through, but we'll reserve some time for duelling. For now, off you go!"

"*Holy fuck, mate!* " Evan hissed as soon as they'd left the classroom - which was very quick, as Regulus didn't feel like facing his teacher or too many students. He had a distinct feeling that Thorne didn't quite like losing in front of his students, and in hindsight, it had been a bit stupid - Regulus felt very uneasy by Thorne's subtle gaze and it would only increase now that he had both disarmed him and shown his ability to cast non-verbal spells. It was an itching feeling; it was always wise to have people underestimate you, to not have them fully aware of your capabilities. Laying all your strengths on the table was, ironically perhaps, very weakening.

"*That was brilliant!"* Barty chipped in. "Fucking, bloody *wild* ." He patted him on the shoulder. "I had no idea you could cast non-verbal spells. That's advanced magic, mate!"

"You seem oddly not thrilled by this all," Isa observed suspiciously. "You did exactly what Thorne wanted you to do."

“I know,” Regulus said, not hard enough for Barty and Evan to hear. “But I feel there’ll be a pushback of some sort. Mother, Thorne… I don’t know. It’ll draw too much attention anyway.”

Regulus was proved right almost immediately. They were having lunch, and, although it had been less than half an hour since the duel, the news seemed to spread like wildfire. There were weird whispers at the Slytherin table, and Regulus found too many students from other houses staring at him. Regulus pretended not to care, avoided all weird gazes, and instead tucked into lunch with an overly flair of normalcy.

“You’re going to be a legend,” Evan roared with laughter.

“Don’t exaggerate,” Regulus shot him, taking a bite from his casserole. “There’s more interesting things going on in the world…”

At that moment, Severus joined them with Avery and Mulciber. “Rumour has it you’ve beaten Thorne in a duel in class.”

Regulus did not respond.

“Word had it you’ve managed to disarm him,” Mulciber said, gauging the credibility of the story.

“It’s true,” Evan said excitedly, jumping in his seat in sheer joy. “It was wonderful.”

“He disarmed him non-verbally, even,” Isa said proudly.

“It was *magic*,” Barty continued.

“Impressive, Black,” Avery nodded. “A fourth-year casting non-verbal spells in a duel against a teacher. Nice.”

Regulus nodded in some attempt at gratitude for the praise, and went back to his casserole. While pouring himself some pumpkin juice, he cautiously let his gaze trail over the Great Hall. Exactly within his eyeshot, but at the other side of the Hall, was his brother with his friends. As if on cue, some random Gryffindor passed by and visibly shared some information, leading Sirius and his group of friends to turn their heads toward Regulus. Sirius’s face showed a weird level of astonishment. Regulus quickly yanked his eyes away from him, but before he could return them entirely to his plate, he saw his brother’s best friend’s eyes staring at him. Potter nodded at him in surprised approval. Regulus felt his face heat up in response and quickly

redirected his gaze to his food, feeling a mixture of annoyance and shame in response to this visible reaction to his praise. He shook it off and pretended to be very interested in the conversation between Avery and Severus, but he couldn't get rid entirely of the uneasy feeling in his chest.

*****

"Reg, Reg, look at this!"

Regulus had just about closed his bed's curtains when they were yanked open again, by no one less than Isa. It was Thursday evening, and since it was already late and classes would start early the next day, it was a weird sight to have Isadora Nott in his dormitory in her night robe, some cloak thrown over her in what Regulus suspected was a futile attempt at concealing her night clothes to his dorm mates.

It failed in the sense that Crabbe was still eyeing her like he was ready to jump her. Selwyn wasn't much better. They had all stuck out their heads from behind their curtains, curious what, in Merlin's name, could possibly bring Isadora Nott to their dormitory at this unholy hour.

"What is it, Ies?" Regulus asked sleepily. "Please, don't tell me you've come for another bloody foot rub–"

"You were right!" she almost shouted. "She's gone, replaced by Minchum!"

All the guys in the dormitory looked at her sheepishly, no clue what she was talking about.

Isa slapped Regulus with a copy of the Evening Prophet.

Oh , the Evening Prophet - she was talking about the Prime Minister!

"No way!" Regulus answered. "She's gone?"

"Scoot over," she demanded, climbing into the bed and tossing him the newspaper she'd just smacked him with. "Breaking News Edition."

"Leave it to Black to get a girl in bed with *political talk*," Crabbe said exasperatedly.

“Go to sleep, Crabbe,” Isa shouted, “the sleep demons are probably feeling awfully lonely without you.”

Regulus snickered and quickly started to read the front page.

———————

Eugenia Jenkins Deposed as Minister for Magic – Harold Minchum Appointed Successor Without Election

By Elara Fawley, Senior Correspondent

In a dramatic shake-up at the Ministry of Magic, Eugenia Jenkins has been officially removed from her post as Minister for Magic following a period of intense criticism over her inability to contain the growing threat posed by terrorists, allegedly Death Eaters. After years of escalating attacks and unrest, the Ministry has opted for a decisive change in leadership to tackle the crisis head-on.

Jenkins, who has held the position since 1968, has been widely regarded as a dedicated and hardworking leader, but her efforts have recently come under fire. Despite increasing security measures, her administration struggled to stem the rising tide of dark activity. Internal opposition and pressure from the Wizengamot and senior Ministry officials ultimately led to her resignation, with sources close to the matter indicating that Jenkins was encouraged to step aside for the greater good.

In an unprecedented move, Harold Minchum, former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has been swiftly appointed as her successor. Unlike the traditional election process, Minchum’s appointment was decided by the Wizengamot in consultation with key Ministry officials under emergency protocols. This decision bypasses normal democratic procedure, a legal measure allowed in times of severe crisis. According to Ministry insiders, there was a sense of urgency that could not be met by the time-consuming electoral process.

Minchum, known for his firm stance on law and order, is expected to take a more aggressive approach to combating the Death Eaters. With a background in magical law enforcement and a reputation for decisive action, his appointment signals a shift in the Ministry’s strategy. The goal is to restore public confidence and take stronger measures to protect wizarding society from the rising threat of terrorist forces.

The magical community, shaken by the growing unrest, now looks to Minchum to stabilise the situation. Many hope that this change in

leadership will mark a turning point in the fight against dark forces, with Minchum at the helm during this critical juncture.

———————

"Wow," he concluded after reading. The article's brevity stood in stark contrast with the importance of the information it conveyed. Just like Regulus thought, there'd be no elections - the entire democratic system bypassed in the name of security and emergency. Another very important feature, that'd probably be noticed only by the observant reader, was the references to Death Eaters. The name was coined so matter-of-factly that one would easily forget the entire term had been considered nothing but a conspiracy for a long time. Apparently the sight of the Dark Mark two more times had altered the course of journalists.

"What do you think happens now?" Isa asked. She quickly casted a silencing charm over the four-poster bed to foil any potential riot among Regulus's tired dorm mates.

"Well, at first not so much, I think. But I feel it'll eventually turn into a full-out war. Minchum is no sissy so his rule won't be either. For the revolutionaries it means they'll either have to conform, or…"

"Or take it up a notch," Isa completed his sentence. Regulus nodded. It was silent for a while, both of them staring into the distance blankly.

"You mind if I sleep here?" Isa asked suddenly.

Regulus hesitated, his body tensing. Yes, he minded. But not because of her - he was positive there wasn't a situation in which he'd be deliberately unwelcoming to his best friend. But he just didn't trust himself at night, with the demons creeping into the cracks of his subconsciousness. He couldn't tell her that, of course. If she knew about the nightmares, she'd know that something happened over the holidays, and she'd force him all the way back into his memories…

And the rumours-card was easy to pull in this case. It was a viable excuse, one that she'd believe easily.

"You know they'll talk," he pointed out.

"And so what?"

"The Black's spare sleeping with the Nott's first-born at the age of fourteen? What are we, Mudbloods?"

Isa laughed, then turned her head towards him and turned serious abruptly.

“You’re afraid,” Isa noted. “Afraid I’ll see that you’re barely holding up. With the nightmares and all.”

This knocked the wind out of him. He winced. He tried very hard to compose himself, but he knew that Isa saw right through him - apparently even more than he’d given her credit for.

“I don’t know what you’re tal–”

“Don’t lie to me, Reg,” she interrupted him firmly. “It’d be outrageously insulting if you thought I’d buy it.”

He knew that. They had known each other for most of their lives. He was certain that no one knew Isa better than he did, and vice versa. Cissy came close, but it was different. She was six years his senior and well, it made her world different. They didn’t go to Hogwarts together, they didn’t share friends, didn’t do homework at the same table…

She does know about that, though, a nagging voice in his head reminded him, *that ought to give Cissy an edge.*

It was something he tried to forget, though - he couldn’t bear the idea of it standing between him and Cissy. His dearest cousin, who’d always been on his side. Who’d probably been the only one dealing with his whole ordeal in a proper manner. It helped that Cissy apparently intended to do the same - not bringing up anything that could lead to the notions they tried to avoid.

But telling Isa, that would be different. Telling her about all the things that kept clouding his brain, the things that sometimes made him feel like he was being eaten alive, bite by bite. They were words - just letters forming words, forming a sentence. But then again, these sentences would form a reality, an existence, that he so dearly wanted to outrun… And if he managed to tell her, how would she react? Would she still see him as Regulus, her best friend through all these years? Would she be repulsed by him as he himself was?

It was an endless debate - he knew he’d have to give her something at some point, especially now that he’d entered a new phase, but the idea of telling her - merely the idea, it made him choke.

He chose to settle. “Look, Ies, I will - I will tell you. Someday.”

Isa didn't look too pleased by this answer but apparently chose to let it go for now. It made Regulus's gut twitch.

"It's just… it's *really* fucked up, Ies." His voice cracked slightly. He cleared his throat and kept staring at the ceiling, not daring to look her in the eyes. It was as far as he'd ever gone - admitting there was something in the first place, and providing some kind of description.

Isa sighed.

"Alright, Reg," she said softly. "Just know that… well, I'm your best friend. I can handle it."

Regulus highly doubted that, but did not share this thought and nodded instead.

"Sleep tight, secret lover," she joked to lighten the mood, exiting his bed and sneaking out of the dormitory.

Regulus fell asleep unusually quickly, but the nightmares were worse than ever.

Chapter 7: Of Bricks & Politics

The fall of Jenkins was all the school talked about the next day - even the thickest, most oblivious and least politically interested among the teenagers. Among the Slytherins, most people were either delighted to be rid of the modernist, progressive nitwit, or afraid now that a hard-liner was at the helm. The line of thought from the other houses' students was, weirdly enough, quite similar but in reverse; they either pitied the loss of their progressive leader that did vaguely remind of her predecessor, or they were glad now there was finally a powerful man in charge that would put the kibosh on the Death Eaters' activities.

Regulus knew all of them were wrong. Yes, it was good that they'd finally gotten rid of this lunatic but they should *also* be glad she was succeeded by someone like Minchum for the simple reason that it'd, in due time, foster the revolution. Under Jenkins the revolution would've stayed covert, but with a hard-liner like Minchum, the revolutionaries had nothing but two choices; cease their activities, or step up their game.

A drawing man will clutch at a straw - a drawing Death Eater will entice a Revolution that'd shake the magical world like never before.

Regulus did not correct all the erroneous political analyses he came across - there were too many, anyway - but instead kept his celebratory feelings to himself and went on with the day. Besides, the last class of the week was Defence, and it'd be the first time Regulus would find himself in the same room with Thorne after the duel-affair, and it was making him peculiarly nervous. They would probably continue with duelling, and Regulus knew that'd it be an entirely awkward ordeal.

"Any plans to outsmart our teacher in another duel in a bit?" Barty grinned, obliviously putting his finger on the sore spot like he often managed to do.

"Ha ha," Regulus retorted, but before he could say anything with substance, Thorne was making his way through the mass of students that had gathered outside the classroom. Regulus looked away awkwardly and was about to take a seat in the back of the classroom, were it not for the fact that his friends practically forced him to sit down in his usual spot. He groaned and pulled his book from his bag in an attempt to look very busy.

“Good afternoon,” Thorne said with his slightly imperious voice. “Today’s class will be both theoretical and practical. During the first hour, we’ll concern ourselves with dark creatures - boggarts, vampires and the like. The second hour, you’ll pair up and choose one creature that you will write a hypothetical report about. So, in what situation you might come across this creature, what you would do in this case, what you *shouldn’t* do in that case, and so on. Any questions?”

He glanced over the crowd of students, and Regulus was surprised a Gryffindor had raised her hand. Thorne nodded.

“Thank you, Professor,” she said in an annoyingly high voice. “I was just wondering, sir, if you could tell us anything about the new Minister of Magic and what the chance in ministers means for … well, our daily lives?”

Regulus groaned. This was a *Defence class* for Merlin’s sake. When had they ever discussed political developments during Defence - or any class, for that matter? No teacher wanted to singe his wings discussing such polarising topics.

“Interesting,” Thorne answered. “Now, what would make you ask about this in my class?”

Precisely.

“Well,” the girl answered, “you’ve been referring to ‘the stuff that is happening out there’ and, well, this is a great part of that, isn’t it? One could argue that it’s rather relevant for your subject, I believe…”

Bold. And rather stupid. At least she’d been sorted right.

Still, Thorne took an unsuspected turn. “Absolutely. I just think that in light of all this House Unity, it’s sometimes wise to steer away from sensitive issues. But - it is also my job to have you informed about the world you’re growing up in.”

The classroom fell entirely silent - Regulus could almost taste the anticipation in the air.

“Well, can anyone tell me - who is Harold Minchum?”

“A hardliner, sir,” another Gryffindor answered.

“Yes,” Thorne nodded. “So - what does that mean?”

“That he’s not a wuss like Jenkins,” Crabbe sniggered. “Doesn’t take much, though.”

This was met with some disapproving sounds among the Gryffindors.

“Now,” Thorne shot immediately, shushing the room, “for the sake of academics, let’s try with some objectivity; let’s talk in hypotheses and let our own ideas and desires go for a while. If we want to discuss topics like these, we’ll have to find a way to do so without you ending up at each other’s throats every other minute. So - tell me again, what is, objectively, meant by Minchum being a hardliner?”

Barty answered. “It means he’ll do anything in his power to put down the revolutionaries.”

Idiot. This was a stupid answer - not because it was wrong, because it wasn’t - but because it gave away Barty’s stance. A revolutionary for one, a terrorist for another.

Regulus knew that Thorne was deemed acceptable by Cissy, but one had to be prudent nonetheless, and so easily disclosing the side you’re on, *especially* as Barty Crouch Sr.’s son, was a very foolish thing to do.

“Yes, he will,” Thorne nodded. “Now, let’s hypothesise - let’s say there’s two sides: the conservatives and progressives. Let’s steer away from terminology such as revolutionaries, terrorists and Death Eaters - I want the least subjective labels.” He glanced over the room, hanging on his every word. “Let’s say you’re a progressive, would you be happy with this change in Ministers?”

There were several students very eager to answer.

“Yes, Mr. Taylor?”

“I think so, sir, because Minchum is stronger than Jenkins and will probably be more effective in knocking down the … conservatives.”

“Alright,” Thorne continued. “And say you’re a conservative, would you be pleased by this change?”

“No,” Crabbe answered like it was obvious. “It’ll be harder to carry out your plans with such an opponent.”

“So - we agree that this is a win for the progressives and a loss for the conservatives, then?”

Almost the entire classroom nodded. Regulus did not, as he didn't agree.

"And what do we think about the elective process - no elections taking place, but instead an appointment, announced late at night? Why would that happen?"

No one answered. Regulus knew the answer, of course, but he felt it was safer to stay lowkey; Thorne was a teacher and the room was full of progressive Gryffindors. Merlin knew what was going to happen under Minchum's reign.

"Really - not one student that has given this a thought?"

Evan and Barty turned around, facing Regulus with a *c'mon-mate-speak-up!*-look. Regulus shook his head, enlarging his eyes warningly as a sign to not draw any attention to him.

"I have the inkling that Mr. Black has some ideas about this," Thorne said.

Bugger.

"Tell me, Mr. Black, do you concern yourself with politics in general?"

Before he could think of a smart comment that wouldn't make him look like a complete idiot but also wouldn't give away his actual interest in politics, Evan almost jumped off his seat and exclaimed proudly: "He's the best, sir. Not a prediction that hasn't been proved right so far! He predicted the appointment of Minchum, even, knew why it wouldn't be a revolut–" Isa kicked him under the table "–conservative."

Regulus groaned. Such a fool.

Thorne looked at Regulus, his eyes yet again piercing and very unsettling.

"Well, in that case," he said with an annoying smirk. "Please do enlighten us - why was Minchum chosen and why not through a conventional electoral process?"

Regulus sighed and took some time to think over what he was going to say - and what not - and with which words. The ice was *very* thin.

"Well," he answered stiffly, not really hard but the room was dead

silent so they'd probably even hear him think, "despite all the developments on the side of the … conservatives, the climate is still rather … progressive. At least within the official circles. The instalment of a conservative thus makes no sense, also in light of still very influential progressives." Bloody Dumbledores and Potters.

Thorne nodded and gestured him to continue.

"But society is more polarised than ever, so a conventional electoral process would probably only underscore that and increase the societal divisions."

"And that would matter, because?"

"Well, I think it's a likely scenario that it would've led to smear campaigns, attacks back and forth, and, with a certain sequence of events, even full-out war between supporters of either political candidate. Seeing the progressive climate, it was easier for the progressives to just install Minchum and continue on the same progressive foot, but more … effectively with Minchum, in all likelihood."

Regulus had a hard time figuring out what Thorne thought about this analysis. The rest of the students looked either very bored or very impressed. Evan and Barty looked at him proudly, as if they were showing off their achievement to the professor.

"And let's say, Mr. Black, that you are a conservative–" Evan snorted at the obviousness of this, which earned him another kick from under the table "--you would be … crushed by the appointment of this new Minister?"

Regulus shook his head firmly. "Hypothetically, Sir," he said prudently, "I think many conservatives are glad with the instalment of Minchum."

Some observant students, both Gryffindors and Slytherins, openly disagreed and were dying to explain why - their hands eagerly waving in the air.

Regulus turned his head towards the rest of the classroom. "A hard-liner in the lead will force the conservatives to work harder, more effectively and, I think in the end, overtly. I think it'll be precisely the harsh stance from Minchum against the conservatives that's going to push them into the open *and* to intensify … their activities."

Regulus was rather pleased with his own, very objective, political analysis. Sure, his name gave away the side he was on, but it'd nevertheless be wise to fake some kind of neutrality. Besides, it'd become common knowledge that Sirius thought very differently, so in dire straits, people would perhaps think that the name wasn't always that telling.

They continued on the topic for some ten minutes, a couple of Gryffindors dominating the conversation while trying to make a case for their stupid progressive outlook on the world - with Thorne reminding them every bloody minute about the 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' that students were ought to show. When at some point Crabbe and Sylas Selwyn threatened to hex two Gryffindor blokes, Thorne decided to finally start the actual topic of his class.

Although it was an interesting class - nice even as he had spent most of it discussing hypothetical bat attacks on the Gryffindors with Isa, Barty and Evan - Regulus was glad when it was over. He'd slept very little and felt the tons of homework he was ought to do over the weekend weighing physically on his shoulders. He knew he had to spend most of his free hours in the library, barring the ones in which he was supposed to be in top form at the pitch. Just as he was about to exit the classroom behind his friends, he heard Thorne's voice. "Mr. Black, could I have a word?"

Regulus stopped in his tracks, glad that there were no students behind him because it'd certainly have resulted in a chain collision.

Isa, Barty and Evan looked at Regulus cautiously.

"Don't worry," Thorne grinned. "I won't take him from you long. And I'll return him without a scratch."

Regulus indicated that it was alright and closed the door before making his way back to the front of the classroom.

"You have quite a knack for politics, Mr. Black."

Regulus didn't dignify this with a response.

"Especially for someone your age," he continued. "The same goes for your wand work. I wonder what other things you have up your sleeves."

Again, Regulus didn't answer, only looking his teacher in the eyes cautiously and as blankly as possible. He closed off his mind, like he

was taught so well to do.

Regulus had the weird feeling that the Professor was about to try to find out what his real thoughts about the current political status quo were. Seeing his mind was closed - though Regulus doubted whether Thorne would go so far as to use Occlumency for such a trivial matter - it would come in the form of a subtle interrogation, conducted in such a manner that his pupil wouldn't realise it was happening until after it was over - but of course, Regulus thought, this pupil was clever and knew what was coming.

But, when Thorne opened his mouth, Regulus was quickly confronted with the notion that he probably wasn't as clever as he thought himself to be, because the words coming out were *very* unexpected.

"I'd like to invite you to a club."

Regulus arched his eyebrows in surprise. "A club, sir?"

"Yes," Thorne said, a whiff of caution in his voice. He was clearly looking for the right words to phrase the next part of the conversation. "It is a club with like-minded people."

"Like-minded people, sir?"

"Allies, so to speak," Thorne clarified. "Allies in the revolution."

Oh…. interesting.

"What is this club for, sir?"

Thorne seemed to consider this question for a while, and slightly nodded his head. "It has multiple objectives - it is a Hogwarts club, though, so it is mostly about networking, cross-year unity and staying up to date about the world."

"Can I ask who is in it, sir?"

"You can ask, but I won't answer. You will have to see for yourself."

Fair enough.

"Will we meet at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, twice a month, or in case something interesting happens. It's officially a duel club - so we will meet in this particular classroom. We will meet in two weeks on Wednesday. Can I count on your

presence?"

"You most certainly can, sir," Regulus responded formally. "I do know some people that are … like-minded, too."

Thorne shot him a small grin. "That'd be Isadora Nott, Barty Crouch Jr. and Evan Rosier?"

Regulus nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Discretion is a prerequisite, Mr. Black - and I have an inkling that it isn't one of Crouch's or Rosier's strong suits."

Regulus, against his better judgement, snorted. "No."

Thorne raised his eyebrows.

"But, they are very devoted, sir," Regulus continued quickly. "Just imagine how devoted one has to be to have Crouch Sr. as a father, and still stand with the revolutionaries like Barty does. And Evan, well, he is just as … steadfast, sir."

"You vow for their discretion, Mr. Black?"

"I do, sir."

"Then you can bring them along. Let me stress, again, that this is officially a duel club - but it won't be wise to draw attention from the wrong people."

Regulus nodded. "Of course, sir."

*****

"*How* am I supposed to survive this year!? Not a single free bloc, weekly meetings with these ASS-nutters *and* biweekly 'duel club' meetings?"

"You're not obliged to go," Regulus shot a very stressed Isa.

"No, no, this club might be the only thing that actually matters!" she exclaimed. "But really… How are *you* going to cope, though? You're at the pitch thrice a week as well."

And barely any sleep, Regulus thought, but he wisely kept that thought to himself.

“I’ll manage. Perhaps I’ll skip some essays or skive off some classes for a change.” He probably wouldn’t - he’d never not handed in his homework and had not missed a single class in his three years at Hogwarts.

“Such a rebel,” Evan grinned. “Look what Thorne is turning you into.”

“When is all this ASS-stuff supposed to happen though?” Barty jawned.

“Tonight,” Regulus groaned. “In less than an hour.”

So, a little while later, Regulus reluctantly made his way out of the Dungeons all the way to one of the charms classrooms on the fifth floor. He’d gotten out of it for some time due to Potter’s detentions, but he now had to face reality at last.

And that reality hit him in the face, *hard*, when he opened the classroom. Thompson and Khan were lounging on the big, fluffy pillows normally used to ensure a soft landing during the charms lessons’ practicals. Coolidge was literally jumping back and forth between them, shooting question after question and excited remark after excited remark at the two girls. They looked very awkward and slightly in pain.

Regulus entered the classroom silently and realised that his two least favourite group members had yet to arrive.

At that precise moment, Potter opened the door cautiously and entered the room. He glanced over the group with an anticipating gaze and nervously ruffled his own hair - like it’d achieve anything, with his hair literally sticking out to all possible sides. Mother would have a heart attack if Regulus even *slept* with a hairdo similar to Potter’s.

“Evening,” he greeted solemnly, sitting down at a desk. Thompson and Khan shot him a polite greeting, but it was drowned out by Coolidge’s enthusiastic chitter-chatter. Regulus decided to block him out immediately in an attempt to stay sane.

They waited for some time for Selwyn to arrive, but at some point they had to conclude that she’d ditched them, and returned to eyeing each other awkwardly.

“Okay… so…,” Potter started, scratching his head. “We’re supposed to sit here and… identify our weaknesses and … improve them, right?”

“I’m sure you have no weaknesses, James,” Coolidge exclaimed immediately. “You are *brilliant*, just *amazing*!”

Regulus couldn’t suppress the urge to pretend to retch. Coolidge, having only eyes for his Gryffindor idol, didn’t notice, but Potter most certainly did and shot him a fuming glare.

“So… should we… pair up?” Thompson asked.

“Does it make sense while it’s just the five of us?” Potter asked.

It didn’t, but Regulus almost really retched when he thought about the five of them sitting in a circle, disclosing their weaknesses, vulnerabilities and whatnot like some sort of support group.

The classroom door creaked open again, causing everyone to turn their heads. In the doorway was no one less than Sabrina Selwyn, who clearly, and unfortunately, hadn’t ditched them. She looked very annoyed and oddly dishevelled.

“Thought you’d ditched us, Selwyn,” Potter shot her with a smirk.

She glared at him. “No, I just couldn’t find the room.”

“Oh, you thought it was somewhere else?” Thompson asked kindly. “Have we mentioned another room than this one at some point?”

Regulus snorted. They clearly didn’t know Selwyn.

“No,” she almost hissed at Thompson. The girl looked rather taken aback at the vicious tone. “I just couldn’t find it.”

“You couldn’t find the room?” Potter blinked.

Regulus bit his lip in an attempt not to laugh. The witch might be thick as a brick, the way she kept stunning people with her lack of intelligence was really a form of the finest sorcery this world had to offer.

“I keep mixing up all the corridors and the like,” she offered as an explanation, a mean edge to her voice like practically always was the case.

“Oh,” Potter answered awkwardly, just now realising that even after more than three years, Selwyn just didn’t know her way around the castle. Regulus grinned at his astonishment. Potter ruffled his hair again - something he apparently did when in distress.

Coolidge somehow even found a source of enthusiasm in Selwyn's stupidity. "Oh, yes, I can imagine, Sabrina! The castle is so *big*, I keep ending up in places I don't recognise and with all the moving stairs… It happens to the best of us. But it's marvellous, isn't it, the castle?" He seemed to fire the question directly at her.

Selwyn blinked, probably very surprised by Coolidge's obliviousness for her cold and mean character. She'd probably prefer to dodge the question, but Coolidge was eyeing her enthusiastically, clearly waiting for an answer.

"Yes," she eventually said stiffly. "Marvellous."

Regulus snorted and realised Potter's reaction was quite the same. They quickly turned silent.

"Now," Khan took the lead after an awkward silence, "let's just discuss the things we want to work on and all, in pairs…"

This was the moment something strange happened. Regulus and Potter were born to be archenemies, and all that happened in the years following their birth had only added to this gap. Potter the representative of modernism, Regulus ever the orthodox, his brother in between - brother by blood to the one, brother by bond to the other.

But fate had it that, now, they somehow ended up in the same boat - that boat being an almost drowning dinghy trying to get away from the two people they both desperately did not want to pair up with.

"Yes! James, you and I will make an unstoppable team!" Coolidge exclaimed.

Regulus slowly steered his head towards the ugly face of Sabrina Selwyn and held his breath in horror. *No way* he was going to be paired up with her.

Potter also looked rather uncomfortable, patting Coolidge on his small head awkwardly.

"Actually," he chipped in quickly, interrupting Coolidge's long list of reasons why he and Potter would make great partners, "I think Selwyn could really benefit from all that … energy you have, chap." He subtly steered him towards her and turned his head towards Regulus.

"That leaves us, Black."

“How *thrilling,*” he shot him sarcastically.

“You could pair up with Gregor, if you’d like, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind–”

“No!” Regulus hissed abruptly, afraid that Coolidge might hear him. True, he hadn’t been dealt a good hand with Potter, Selwyn and Coolidge, but of all the cards, he would choose Potter in an instant. And that was particularly saying something about how much he hated Selwyn and Coolidge’s optimism.

“So,” Potter said awkwardly once they’d sat down at a table. The others had also shuffled into their pairs, all of them taking a corner of the classroom. “Weaknesses.”

Regulus shot him an annoyed glare. “Yes, so, tell me, Potter - what are you rubbish at?” He grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill out of his pocket.

Potter sighed, clearly thinking about an answer. He absentmindedly glanced over the classroom. He was taking a long time - too long, honestly.

“*Modesty* would be one to start out with,” Regulus said dryly, pretending to write something on the parchment.

“Ha ha,” Potter shot him sarcastically. “I was just thinking about this year’s subjects.”

“It doesn’t have to be school-related. You could be rubbish at tying your shoelaces. Or keeping your hair in tow.”

“There’s no remedy for that,” Potter shot him, annoyed. “Believe me, my parents tried. It took my dad years to invent the Sleekeazy’s Potion and well, even that hasn’t done the trick.”

Unwillingly, Regulus broke out in laughter.

Potter, probably witnessing him laughing for the first time ever, looked at him in surprise. “What?”

“Your dad’s invented Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion?” he laughed. “Like, *the* Hair potion the entire world is going bonkers about, and you’re walking around like - like this?” He pointed at Potter’s disaster of a haircut.

“Yes, very funny,” Potter said, clearly starting to get worked up. It was oddly easy and satisfying to get a rise out of him. “Now back to our actual weaknesses. You know, the ones we can work on. What subjects are you rubbish at?”

To be honest, there wasn’t really one, as he excelled in all his courses, and there were only two subjects he didn’t take…

“Divination,” he offered. “Yes, I couldn’t tell a grim from a sheep in the dregs of a cup.”

“Does anyone?” Potter chipped in dryly. “What about your other subjects? What are you taking?”

“Everything except for Divination and Muggle Studies.”

“*Everything*?” Potter asked, stunned.

“Except for Divination and Muggle Studies,” Regulus repeated, annoyed.

“You won a duel against Thorne,” Potter said all of a sudden. The statement surprised Regulus, but then it struck him that Potter had probably been looking for an opportunity to bring up that subject to no avail, and had just decided to throw it in.

“Yes.”

“*How*? I’ve seen the man duel in our class, it’s impossible. What’s your secret?”

Regulus sighed. “There’s no big secret. I just took him off guard.”

“*How*? What spells did you use - was it advanced –”

“It was just a simple Expelliarmus,” Regulus interrupted him, starting to get utterly annoyed by this interrogation. “Now can we go back to–”

“But, *how*?”

Regulus smacked the piece of parchment and quill on the table in exasperation. “The guy didn’t know I could cast non-verbal spells; I pretended to throw a tickling spell at him, but instead casted a disarming spell non-verbally. There was no advanced magic, no extraordinary stuff, just the guy being thrown off guard.”

Potter shot him a gaze that Regulus didn't understand. "That's still impressive, though. There's a lot of students that only start to master non-verbal spells in seventh year…"

"I'm not 'a lot of students'," Regulus shot him quickly. "Now back to this crap - what subjects do you struggle with?"

Potter admitted his defeat and sighed. "Err – I could do better in Care for Magical Creatures, I guess…"

"Dandy," Regulus responded. "Let's drag some skrewts and a hippogriff into the castle for you to practise on, and the relay will be like duck soup."

"Better steer clear of that terminology around them, though," Potter smirked. "The prospects of ending up in soup might scare them off."

"We'll leave them to Selwyn. Ought to give us a nice show."

And strangely so, they ended up laughing in unison.

*****

Daily Prophet: Attack on Squib Activist's Home Shocks Wizarding Community

By Derek Gibson, Special Correspondent

The wizarding world was rocked yesterday by a brazen attack on the home of prominent Squib rights activist Edgar Crumb near Godric's Hollow. The Ministry of Magic has confirmed that Crumb's residence was ransacked by unknown assailants, with evidence suggesting the use of dark magic.

Crumb, who was not present at the time, has long been a vocal advocate for Squib rights and equality. His home, where he resides alone, was found heavily damaged, with curses having left significant destruction in their wake.

Local residents reported seeing suspicious figures near the property before the attack. "There was a strange, dark light coming from the house, like something sinister was happening," said Mrs. Rosamund Longbottom, a neighbour. "It's terrifying to think someone would target Edgar like this."

Crumb, who leads the Squib Equality Movement, expressed his outrage in a statement to the Daily Prophet. "This attack is nothing more than an attempt to silence those of us who fight for equality. It will not work. We

will not be intimidated."

The Ministry of Magic, under the leadership of newly appointed Minister Harold Minchum, has vowed swift action. Minchum, known for his hardline stance on law and order, declared, "This was an act of violence and intimidation, and it will not go unanswered. Those responsible will be found and held accountable."

Minchum's firm policies on security have drawn praise from some quarters, though there is concern that his response may lead to increased tensions within the magical community, particularly as Squibs and Muggle-borns continue to face rising prejudice.

The attack on Crumb's home is the latest in a series of troubling incidents that have left many in the wizarding world feeling uneasy. As the investigation continues, the Ministry is urging all witches and wizards to remain vigilant.

*****

"Yes, done! Finite! Over!" Isa exclaimed delightedly. "I will actually have a day off tomorrow! I can hardly believe it!" She slammed her Transfiguration book shut and triumphantly threw her quill on a thick stack of parchment.

"You're such a swot, Nott," Evan shot her. "Homework on Saturday evening."

"Why do *you* have a piece of parchment in front of you, then, Rosier?" Isa shot him in defence.

"This isn't homework," Barty said quickly, "this is us party planning."

Regulus groaned from the sofa he was lying on. "Party planning."

"Yes, Halloween is around the corner–"

"Another bloody month, Crouch," Isa shot him.

"Yes, so, around the corner. We'd like to throw one heck of a party, so it'll need planning."

"What do you need planning for?" Regulus jawned. "Just tell people to show up and you're there, right?"

"No," Evan said, "we want a *real* party - all Slytherins present, music, dancing, booze."

Isa and Regulus interlocked gazes, mirroring each other's crooked eyebrows.

"And how are you planning on doing that?" Isa asked. "You can't expect your owl to deliver your 'booze' now, can you?"

"I'm sure there are some people that know how," Barty continued, eyeing the group of students occupying the best seats in the common room - Lestrange and Dolohov, accompanied by three girls. They were clearly having a good time, smirking and laughing and looking around like they owned the place. The girls were practically drooling over them.

"You want to collaborate with Lestrange and Dolohov?" Regulus asked carefully. He shot Isa a subtle worried look. Her gaze confirmed the mutual feeling that Barty probably had no idea who he was dealing with. She sat down next to Regulus on the sofa.

"Well, they've thrown some good parties, they clearly know how to smuggle Firewhiskey into the castle…"

"I'm sure there are more people that know how," Isa tried. "Some sixth-years - or Avery, Mulciber?"

Barty shrugged. "We'll see. We want to work some things out first anyway."

"C'mon, Barty, let's check our Zonko's stock before we decide on decoration."

And with a wink, they made their way to the dorm, leaving Isa and Regulus behind in the practically deserted corner of the common room.

"You look tired," Isa said, eyes running over him suspiciously. "Don't you want to sleep?"

Regulus did want to be rested, but very much did not want to sleep, so he shook his head. "No, I'm fine, not tired at all–"

"Sure," she shot him, her voice betraying that she did not believe him in the slightest. She grabbed Regulus's head and forced it down on her lap.

"No, Ies," Regulus whispered quickly, "not here, it's weird–"

“Who bloody cares,” Isa shot him, “and as if anyone is paying any attention to us - they’re all eyeing the seventh-years or playing games over there. No one even seems to notice this corner.”

Regulus gave in and returned his head on her lap. Isa started stroking his curls slowly - it really was the most magnificent feeling. Soft, slim fingers stroking his hair, her nails the perfect length for occasionally scratching his head softly. Regulus was sure this is what heaven must be like - the heaven Muggles seemed to talk about in their books all the time. He hummed.

“So, how was your ASS-meeting?” she asked, twirling a curl around her finger and untangling it again.

“Alright,” Regulus answered. “Pointless, to be honest. I think we were supposed to come up with ideas about how to ‘tackle our weaknesses’ or whatever, but I don’t think we ended up with something tangible in the end. How’s your teammates?”

“Alright - I guess.”

“Who’s in your group again? Longbottom–”

“Yes, all kind and leading, of course. The perfect bloody Gryffindor prefect,” Isa said with disdain.

Regulus chuckled. “Who’s the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs?”

“*Ivy* and *Olivia*, both Mudbloods. Practically silent the entire meeting.”

“Wasn’t Lupin in your group as well?”

“Yes, much like Longbottom - the welcoming Gryffidor taking all of this way too seriously.”

“So, that leaves…,” Regulus went over the list he’d read some time ago when hearing about the groups, realising he missed a sixth-year Ravenclaw, “…Davies.”

Isa nodded. “Yes, Nathaniel Davies. He seems alright.”

Regulus felt something he could not really place - a stiffness in her voice, a momentary pause in her stroking. He forgot about it instantly when she ran all five fingers of a hand through the curls in his neck, making him drift off in ecstasy.

“How about you?” Isa forced him back to reality. “I’m sure you had a marvellous time with Selwyn?”

Regulus snorted. “Well, you wouldn’t believe the fun she adds to this all - no one can wrap their head around her being that stupid.”

Isa laughed. “Yes, she tends to have that effect on people. How’s the Hufflepuff?”

“Peeing his pants in excitement every other minute,” Regulus answered. “Especially since he’s been teamed up with his idol.”

Isa seemed to consider this for a while. “Potter?”

Regulus nodded, shifting his head slightly to grant her access to the other side of his head.

“How’s things with … him?” Isa asked cautiously.

The subject of James Potter came dangerously close to that of Regulus’s brother, something everyone tried to steer away from under all circumstances. His friends knew it was a slippery slope - they all clearly felt that Sirius hadn’t just betrayed traditionality in general, but also Regulus on a very personal level. Regulus naturally agreed, but his feeling of having a monopoly on berating Sirius often came in the way of his friends’ showing their unwavering support in the matter. They had no idea, though, in the end, what it was really like to be losing your brother slowly while in flesh he was so close, breathing, his presence all over the castle. So close physically, but in essence further apart than they’d ever been. And well, Potter was probably the biggest reason behind this; welcoming Sirius in the House of Gryffindor with open arms, with his all-accepting outlook and smile full of bloody tolerance and unconditional kindness. Still, Regulus had to agree somewhere deep down, he understood Potter’s appeal to his brother.

“Surprisingly,” Regulus admitted, “he seems quite alright, too.”

Chapter 8: Of Clubs & Tracks

“Such a good boy, you are - now come, shhh, it’ll be alright.”

He felt the skin of a large hand slowly tracing the shudder that’d gone down his spine. It was strange, how something so familiar could feel so different, so new - every time, distinctive. Every time, unparalleled.

“Such a good boy - wonderful…”

The breath in his neck was as hot as his insides grew cold at the smell - again, familiar, but distinctive every time. The confliction spreading over him like the breath that seemed to roll over his body like a destructive wave, locating all the furtive creaks and pervading, pervusing, subjugating.

His own hands following the same path, his own fingers finding the same places, acquainted with every crushing pore, every sweeping wrinkle, taking in the words. Such a good boy. So wonderful.

Then, all of a sudden, completely paralysed, pinned to the surface. Taking it all in and yet letting it slide past. The words, admiring but slaughtering slowly. The smell, kind and warm but chilling to the marrow. The movements, fast and hurried, but making his flesh crawl and stopping time. He was so numb, yet he felt everything, the surreptitious shame, the irreconcilability of the hatred and the affection, the feelings of betrayal and pride. It made him sick.

“Wonderful.”

No - No, it had to stop, he didn’t want - no. He couldn’t bear it any longer, the sweat dripping on him, the hair in his face, the legs too hot against the bare skin, it was too much, it had to stop, he wanted to leave - he had to run, scream - make himself heard.

Don’t leave me behind!

Look at me!

Can’t you see? Won’t you see?

Why are you looking away?

A hand trailing his tears. Is this how it is supposed to be? Supposed or not - let me break the rules, let me crush them all.

Don't leave me! Can't you see?

Another wave of hot lips in another furtive creak. Drifting away, slowly fading into the confliction of it all.

Can't you see? No - leave me, stop it, go away, please, I'm begging you, please, go…

Wonderful, yes, you know how, don't let them know, they have left you, they see, they feel, but no one wants you, but me. I am here, take me, let me take you, feel me, let me feel you - NO -

"NO!"

Regulus shut up in the air, panting heavily, smacking off the arms that he abhorred so. Turning his head quickly away from the smell, leaping away from the touch.

It took him a moment or two to realise that there were no arms to smack off, there was no smell to turn away from and there was no touch from which to leap away.

He was in his bed, in his dorm, at Hogwarts.

Regulus sighed and trembled at the feelings that another round of nightmares had left slimmering in his body. He was turning desperate - he'd hoped to have to go through a rough patch in order to get back to normal, but the nightmares were unremitting and the dividing line between dreams and reality was starting to become blurry. It felt so *real* , he was *there* , he *felt* it…

He shrunk back into the mattress, wrapping the sheets around him in an attempt to protect himself, and, to his astonishment, felt the wetness on his pillow. He had been crying.

"What are you? A sissy? Stop it, no more!" Mother shrieked.

Regulus closed his eyes in shame and decided he had to shake off all of it for a while before going back to defying his thoughts again in another attempt to sleep. He sat up slowly, threw on a cloak and silently made his way to the common room, which was, as to be expected, empty. He lit the fire with his wand and took a seat on the sofa closest to the fire, cursing himself that he hadn't thought of bringing a book with him. It'd be at least an hour before he could go back to sleep without feeling that same amount of dread that he'd been woken up with, so he had some time to fill.

Just when he was about to debate whether to risk waking up his dorm mates in a quest for some reading material, he heard the, very unexpected, voice of Isa.

“Another one of those nights?”

Regulus didn’t dare look her in the eyes - or her way, for that matter - but felt her sitting down next to him. He knew that he looked run down and was silently praying that his eyes didn’t betray that he’d been crying at some point.

“What are you doing up?” he asked with a soft voice.

“I had a nightmare - just a silly dream, but then I started thinking about all the homework I had to do today and then my brain just wouldn’t shut up.”

“What was your nightmare about?”

Isa chuckled. “I was being chased by my Transfiguration Essay, while the voice of McGonagall just kept shrieking that it was the worst piece that’d been handed into her - ever. Well, with her voice in your head, even a corpse wouldn’t be able to sleep.”

Regulus chuckled softly, although he didn’t feel it in his heart. It was Isa that broke the silence.

“Still, I think it is nothing compared to the nightmares you’ve been dealing with.”

He felt her gaze on him, but still couldn’t gather the courage to look her way, and instead opted for the hands on his laps to investigate.

“You need to get help, Reg,” Isa said softly. “It looks like it’s killing you.”

It probably was – Regulus knew that continuous sleep deficiency was unhealthy at best. However, he also knew that there was nothing, no one to help.

“I’m fine”

“Cut the bollocks,” Isa shot him immediately. “I barely recognise your eyes sometimes. You’re being haunted by something. Now– I propose you try a Dreamless Sleep Potion every now and then. I can make a batch.”

“They’re dangerous,” Regulus shot her, finally meeting her gaze. “The effects will wear off after a couple of times–”

“If you take them once a week, in the beginning perhaps even twice, you’ll be safe. Perhaps there’s a weaker version, even, with less side effects– toning down the drowsy feeling the rest of the day, the memory loss… We’ll have to do some research.”

Regulus sighed. “I’m not sure it’s going to work, Ies.”

“We’re never sure, but we have to try. I really don’t know how you think you’re going to survive this all.”

Frankly, he didn’t really think far into the future – but it wasn’t a stupid concern. He knew he couldn’t live like this forever– feeding off a couple of hours of sleep every day, the hours not even counting fully due to the nightmares, the endless tossing and turning. He knew it wasn’t healthy.

“Sure,” Regulus sighed eventually, still not meeting her gaze. “We’ll try. Thanks, Ies.”

“Anytime, Reg.”

*****

“You think there’s a dress code?” Barty asked nervously. He was skittering around in the dormitory, his trunk open on his bed, bulging out with robes and cloaks. He held a set of robes up, deciding it apparently wouldn’t do, tossed it on the ground, and grabbed another set. It reminded Regulus oddly of Cissy’s conduct before parties or networking events. Weird.

Isa witnessed the scene in disapproval and quickly made her way to the clothes neglected on the floor. She had an almost unhealthy fondness of cleanliness and organisation, not unlike Regulus. He was the only one in his dorm that’d hung his robes and had carefully stored his folded clothes in the designated closet. He was also the only one whose nightstand was tidy, with only a case for his wand and a neat pile of books on it, and whose bed wasn’t practically closed in by clothes, old socks, torn pieces of parchment, candy wrappings and other junk. No, Regulus had been taught how to leave his room behind and, frankly, the tidiness made life easier and more comprehensible.

“What are you, attending a bloody ball?” an irritated Isa shot him. She

smoothed out the robes with her hands and hung it up delicately in Evan's still dusty closet.

"No," he said while rolling his eyes. "But it's something official, isn't it? First impressions matter."

Regulus snorted. "Just wear your school robes and don't talk too much," he advised playfully. "And don't forget it's officially a duel club."

It was almost halfway October, and they were about to attend their first meeting with Thorne. Regulus was positive that Evan and Barty might've slept just as little as him this week - albeit for different reasons - and there'd been secretive whispers among them at least twice a meal, mostly revolving around who might or might not be a member, what to expect, about Thorne's background and the like. Since no new information had presented itself in the meantime, the conversation was essentially the same all the time, going into circles, and it frankly had become rather dull.

Still, Regulus couldn't help but grin at his friends' enthusiasm. Evan was still digging his way through his trunk, Isa berating him every time he threw another piece of clothing on the floor before folding it or hanging it carefully in his closet. Regulus was glad that Selwyn and Crabbe were in detention, since it was almost impossible to hide Evan's and Barty's enthusiasm.

The door to the bathroom flew open, revealing a freshly showered Barty that shamelessly made his way to his bed in nothing but his underpants. He smirked confidently at Isa, who rolled her eyes in response. "Put some clothes on, Crouch."

"Yes, milady," he obliged.

"And you - have you chosen your dress yet?" Isa shot Evan. His trunk was almost empty from clothes that had all been neatly organised in the meantime.

"Whatever," he sighed in defeat, "I'll just wear my school robes."

"You think it was all just a scheme to get you to organise his closet?" Regulus grinned.

"You're overestimating his intelligence, Black," Isa smirked.

It took him a bit too long to work out the insult which underscored

Isa's point exactly, sending Regulus and Isa into a fit of laughter.

"Well, let's go," Barty said eventually after all clothes were put on, hair was combed and wands were pocketed.

They made their way out of the common room as smoothly as possible, trying not to draw attention from anyone. There'd be the cover of being a duel club in case someone became too nosy, but it was better to avoid any attention whatsoever.

Evan was practically hopping his way to the third floor and although Barty pretended to be very composed and indifferent, Regulus noticed his quick pace and impatience at Isa and Regulus towing behind.

"C'mon, don't want to be late," he shot them.

Isa sniggered but turned silent when they were in front of the classroom's door. There was an awkward moment in which no one knew whether to knock and who had to take up the honour if so, before Regulus rolled his eyes in irritation and pushed his friends aside. He knocked softly and opened the door subsequently.

The number of students already present in the classroom showed that although they might not have been late, they weren't early either. The normally very boring and plain classroom had undergone quite the metamorphosis; the students' desks had been replaced by coffee tables, differing in size and heights, the chairs were vanished and instead there were fauteuils, sofas and comfortable chairs scattered around the room. In the front there was a large fauteuil, indicating the place where Thorne was probably to sit. On the right side of the Professor's seat, there was a higher, long table serving as a bar, filled with snacks, glasses of champagne and Firewhiskey, Butterbeer and pumpkin juice. Regulus saw Evan and Barty eyeing the drinks eagerly in the corner of his eyes.

"Good evening, lads, and - madam," Thorne said with a grin, welcoming the new students into the room.

Regulus recognised most of the students, since the fast majority belonged to the House of Salazar. There was Dolohov and Lestrange with two girls from their year in one corner, eyeing the arrival of Regulus and his friends with interest. Regulus nodded stiffly in greeting, feeling he had to formally recognise their existence, although he'd rather steer a wide berth. There were three sixth-years in the middle of the classroom, clearly amidst a thrilling conversation, and Regulus was surprised to see two third-years; the Arrow-twins. He'd

expected to be the youngest of the crowd, but apparently he wasn't. Regulus also recognised three Ravenclaws, from the sixth or seventh year, hoovering awkwardly in another corner. Before he could give the notion of being a Ravenclaw in this Slytherin-dominated crowd any thought, the door behind him swung open again to mark the arrival of three other Slytherins - Severus, Mulciber and Avery. Regulus greeted them, glad there were some friendly faces around.

"Good evening, everyone," Thorne's voice sounded, drawing all attention and looks to the front of the room. "Thank you for joining me, old friends –" his gaze travelled over Lestrange's and Dolohov's corner "-- and new ones–" to Regulus's side of the room, slowly, from student to student, his eyes stopping at Regulus. He was wondering if he'd ever grow accustomed to the Professor's penetrating gaze.

"It's excellent to see so many young minds gathered here tonight. Take a look around, get to know each other - because these people here, they will be your compatriots. They will be with you, the ones you'll confide in, whose shoulders will be touching yours when we go to war."

Whispering broke out immediately, and Regulus understood why - *go to war*. No sugarcoating, no disingenuous terminology, just plain, open, *war* . Although he felt the weight of the words and the message Thorne was conveying and thought he was rather smart at analysing people's words and hidden meanings, it was months, years even, when he would actually realise the importance of this meeting; both the shift it brought about, but also the shift it itself marked. Now, however, Regulus warily eyed Dolohov's smirk and Lestrange's arrogant gaze, and very much doubted if he ever wanted to rub shoulders with the two of them - be it literally, as Thorne had hinted at, or figuratively.

"Yes - *war*. You are still young, protected by the Hogwarts' walls, but there will come a time you realise that the world's future lies on your shoulders. The question is - what is this future you envisage, and how do you achieve this?"

It took Regulus a while to realise that this was an actual question, and that they were supposed to answer it.

"I suppose you all summon a drink before we dive into these questions," Thorne nodded. Apparently Regulus hadn't been the only one startled by this question.

Regulus did as asked and summoned himself a Butterbeer, noticing that Barty and Evan had gone for Firewhiskey instead.

“What are you doing?” Regulus hissed.

“Calm down,” Barty shot in defence. “The dude’s talking about going to war - you really think he cares if I’m drinking Firewhiskey?”

“You won’t be of age in three years,” Isa pointed out.

“My birthday is in January, so practically two,” Barty shot her. “C’mon, don’t be such a wuss.”

Regulus rolled his eyes and relocated his attention to Thorne.

“Now, let me ask this again - what will the future be like, and how do we get there?”

Unsurprisingly, it was Lestrange who answered first. His voice was almost identical to his brother’s, Regulus now just realised. “The world will be rid of the scum that’s been rotting society at its base. There’ll be natural order, and those who challenge it, will by then have understood the folly of their ways.”

Dolohov snickered while the two girls were practically drooling over them.

“And how do we get there, Mr. Lestrange?”

“Like you’ve said already, Professor, via *war*.”

“And who are to be our adversaries?” Thorne continued. “Where do we draw the line?”

“Everyone, every force working against us,” Dolohov entered the dialogue. “There’ll be no room for morality, fine lines and the like - you’re either with us or against us, and if you belong to the latter, you’re out.”

This started a long discussion about who was to be identified as the enemy - Mudbloods, blood traitors, Squibs, halfbreeds, all of them were mentioned, and how to go about winning dominance over them - with brute force, or other tactics.

Regulus remained silent the entire time, thinking over everyone’s answers and realising there were essentially two camps - either those that wanted to accomplish everything with nothing but brute force, or

the ones that seemed to think that their cause was so clearly justified that it would not take any effort wooing the fast majority of the wizarding world over. The Ravenclaws and the sixth-year Slytherins were clear proponents of the latter, the most vocal Slytherins - Lestrange, Dolohov, Mulciber - clearly proponents of the former.

Regulus considered their stances and realised he didn't agree with either of them. Not completely, at least.

Then Thorne did something that made Regulus highly uncomfortable.

"I'm sure there's more to this - anyone else?" he asked, looking over the group of students. Like what happened so often, Regulus knew it was he on whom his eyes would ultimately rest. He even suspected that the gaze-trailing-over-students was all an act, and that he could've just outright asked Regulus about his opinion. "Mr. Black, would you like to share some insights, perhaps?"

Regulus was very aware of the students focusing on him, almost piercing holes in his body where their eyes rested. He coughed awkwardly and realised that he might've set the bar a bit high with his political analysis in the Defence class. Thorne must have high expectations, Regulus thought. "Eh, well," he started, shifting in his chair uncomfortably, "it won't be just about brute force, will it? It's also about controlling the forces others don't even understand yet. The weak focus on what's in front of them, but the powerful manipulate what lies behind the curtain." It was true - true power lay there where people didn't realise it was wielded.

"Wise words," Thorne said approvingly. "Care to substantiate?"

This was clearly necessary, because he saw some very sheepish looks, the most impressive among them being Evan's.

"Well - if we want the revolution to succeed, it will be more beneficial to try other ways before we go to full-out war, I think. For example, there's a lot of floating supporters - they might be convinced to join the revolution with little persuasion. These are the people that we'll scare off if we start an outright war immediately, and that'd be a loss."

"Why would that be a loss?" Dolohov countered immediately. Regulus tried very hard not to feel intimidated by him. "If they can't tell right from wrong in the first place - why bother at all?" This was met by several approving sounds.

“Well,” Regulus said, not very eager to look Dolohov directly in his eyes but doing it anyway out of politeness, “it probably is a substantial part of society, and we can’t really afford to lose the fast majority of our society. Ridiculous they are, but these Muggle-Wizarding-Mingling Protocols have been brought into existence for a reason; we don’t want to just… go out of existence, do we? It’s not just about seizing power, it is also about knowing *what* we are seizing power for - and that’s it, our existence, our tradition, our survival.”

In a weird turn of events, Lestrange nodded, impressed. “That actually makes sense.”

“Told you he has a knack for politics,” Thorne nodded to the seventh-years.

It made Regulus utterly uncomfortable knowing that they had apparently been discussing him.

“Still,” Mulciber chipped in, “it feels so … pointless just going forward like this. There’s things happening but it isn’t *enough* . And don’t forget the other side is recruiting as well.”

Avery agreed with his friend. “Yes, we know who our enemies are, it is just a matter of eliminating them.”

“Do we?” Regulus snapped his head towards Isa. “Do we know who our enemies are?” she continued.

Regulus realised that she was the first girl to speak - the entire discussion being dominated by men until so far.

“Obviously,” Dolohov defended, rolling his eyes annoyedly. “Mudbloods, blood traitors, halfbreeds–”

“Assuming you’re referring to werewolves, among others,” Isa cut him short - it didn’t go past Regulus that Dolohov clearly felt very offended by being interrupted- “I think we’d miss out on some allies if we were to push them into the opposing camp right away.”

This was met by a lot of stunned looks, but Regulus knew exactly in which direction Isa was going, and felt oddly proud that she’d clearly thought of this too.

One of the seventh-year girls sitting with Dolohov and Lestrange was visibly appalled by this idea. “Werewolves, *allies*?” she shrieked.

“Yes,” Isa said coldly, clearly annoyed by the girl’s shrill voice, “I don’t mean that we should get friendly with halfbreeds - I just mean that they might want to choose our side once we offer what conventional politicians haven’t been able to offer so far.”

Again, many sheepish faces, the biggest belonging to Evan - although Regulus didn’t quite know whether it was because of the topic’s complicated nature or just the amount of Firewhiskeys that he’d downed already. Regulus had never seen him drink - except for some Veela Vodka that had resulted in a fit of coughing underscoring his amateurism. It’d probably not take much to get him plastered.

“Yes,” Thorne nodded, “it is no secret that the relationship between the Ministry and the Werewolfs is… hostile. That’s an interesting take, Ms. Nott.”

“My point still stands for Mudbloods and blood traitors,” Dolohov shot, not amused by the praise Isa was granted.

“There’s a large group not falling into either category, but also not likely to be very supportive of full-out war,” Isa continued. “I agree with the idea that full-out war is imprudent at this stage.”

“Makes it feel pointless, still,” Avery said. “So much more can be done - we have *numbers*, we have *power*.”

“Sometimes the best moves are made without lifting a wand,” Isa said wisely.

And Regulus knew she was right.

*****

Although Regulus was completely knackered that evening, it took longer than normal to fall asleep. He kept going over all the points that were raised during the meeting with Thorne - the ideas people had brought up, the subtle looks. They had continued discussing the revolution for at least an hour before Thorne had forced everyone to take some snacks and mingle with some music in the background. It had been quite an awkward affair, since Evan clearly had had a drink or two too much, and Regulus tried to hide it while all the time being bombarded by Mulciber and Avery that clearly wanted to discuss things further. Severus had noticed Regulus’s awkwardness and Evan’s unstable waddle and had tried to steer his friends away from them, but to no avail. On top of this, Thorne kept trying to draw his attention with Dolohov and Lestrange in tow - the three people he

probably fancied the least seeing at that point. Luckily, they were excused once the clock had struck ten, and Isa and Regulus had dragged Evan to the dormitory immediately, with Barty barking in laughter behind them - he wasn't as drunk as Evan, but his breath and joviality betrayed he wasn't very sober either.

"A little young to become a drunkard, don't you think?" Isa said when they'd finally managed to get Evan in bed. He fell asleep immediately.

"Agree," Regulus said.

"See you tomorrow," Isa said while making her way out of the dorm. She shot him a worried look. "Sleep tight, Reg."

"You too, Ies," Regulus answered, knowing the meaning behind her concerns.

"Just snog her already," Barty shouted in annoyance from his bed. "Or shag - not sure what stage you guys are in."

"No stage," Regulus shot. "And there won't be, either."

"I really don't understand," Barty slurred, "you can't be just friends, you two…"

"Yes, we can, now go to sleep," Regulus ordered, annoyed.

"Nah, mate," he said, his hands making exaggerated gestures to underscore his point, "you two are too sparky-" Regulus laughed at his choice of words "-and fucking *sweet* to each other. If you don't end up together I'll eat my bloody wand."

Regulus snorted. "Bon appetit."

*****

The next day, Regulus couldn't help but laugh at the contrast between the meeting he was about to attend and the one he had been dragging Evan drunk away from the night prior. It was astonishing, what a difference one night made in the surroundings he found himself in.

"Evening," he nodded while entering the familiar Charms classroom. He was about to make a sarcastic comment about how delighted he was to be where he was, when Potter coughed very hard, drawing Regulus's attention to a corner of the classroom he had yet to take in.

The sudden fit of coughing was explained by the presence of no one other than McGonagall. Potter, who was standing next to her, mouthed a '*watch out*' for which Regulus was quite thankful.

Once they were all complete, they looked up at the Gryffindor's Head of House expectantly. Regulus was certain that her presence had something to do with the upcoming relay - be it that the date or assignment itself had been changed or something else along those lines.

"Good evening," she eventually greeted them. "I'm here tonight to guide your group in the right direction."

Regulus raised his eyebrows.

"I have been getting reports that this group is … wielding disappointing results."

Regulus couldn't suppress the urge to snort. Obviously - although they had tried to take the assignment seriously in the first meeting in which they'd paired up, they had completely let go of any of this in the follow-up meetings in which they'd just sit and do their homework, occasionally bringing up some gossip or berating some teacher.

Regulus wondered how McGonagall knew of this, though, and shortly considered that Coolidge might have ratted them out in some form of disappointment that his signs of undying love for Potter had not been reciprocated. But then he realised that *of course* the teachers knew exactly what they were up to all the time during this project; they were being graded also based on their level of cooperation and other bollocks between the assignments. They were ought to have spies in some form - portraits and the like.

"That is why tonight, you will be doing an exercise," McGonagall continued. "One of my choosing. You will have to complete a track in pairs - the idea will be to guide your partner through a track of obstacles, unlocking the next step by answering questions about each other."

Regulus groaned in horror. *A bonding exercise? Guiding partners?* Wasn't this school supposed to offer some form of *education*?

Potter smirked at Regulus's face, but McGonagall chose to ignore it completely.

"You are allowed to pair up yourselves, and then will commence."

“Professor?” Thompson asked.

“Yes, Ms. Thompson?”

“Where’s this track of obstacles?”

“Oh, yes,” McGonagall said, and she flicked her wand, due to which the entire Charms classroom was transfigured into some kind of field with three tracks. The tracks were interrupted by obstacles and large goblets, probably marking the points where they were supposed to go confessing their deepest secrets in light of some stupid bonding exercise. “Well, you’d better get started if you want to make it to your dormitories at some point this evening.”

“You’re with me, Black,” Potter hissed quickly.

“Really?” he asked coldly. “And you get to decide, because…?”

Potter smirked. “You prefer a heart-to-heart with Selwyn or Coolidge?”

He knew he’d lost before the battle had even started and sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

They made their way to the first track, where a piece of parchment was floating in the air, a piece of cloth attached to it. Potter grabbed the parchment and started to read, his expression going from questioning to comical.

“You’re going to love this,” he sniggered, waving the piece of cloth. “You want to go first?”

“Sure,” Regulus shot him in annoyance.

“Well, get here,” Potter motioned, still waving the piece of cloth.

“What are you playing at, Potter?” Regulus asked. “What’s that for?”

“I have to blindfold you,” Potter smirked, visibly trying very hard not to burst out in laughter.

Regulus looked at him, perplexed. “Bl - blindfold me?”

“You’ll have to make your way across the track by my guidance,” Potter sniggered. “Blindly.”

Regulus’s mouth fell open. “You’ve got to be bloody kidding me.”

Potter laughed, shaking his head. “Now, Black, let me blindfold you.” He closed the distance between them and placed the cloth in front of his eyes from behind so he could easily tie it. He felt Potter’s hand brush his curls and felt very uncomfortable by this touch - and the idea that Potter touched him, probably for the first time, and the idea that he somehow registered this knowledge. He shook it off and returned to the scene - blindly, that is.

“That I get to see the day that Sabrina bloody Selwyn turns out to be right with her blindfolding,” he complained.

This earned a large bark of laughter from Potter.

“Now, let’s start, this way, yes, now right ahead–” Regulus walked ahead, cautiously and slowly.

“You’re allowed to *walk*,” Potter said, “no need for the small steps.”

“‘One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind’,” Regulus quoted.

“What’s that?”

Regulus groaned. “Aren’t you supposed to be the Muggle lover? Neil Armstrong? The moon landing?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” Regulus shot him, irritated. “Do I just walk straight ahead?”

“Yes, you’ll have to jump over a threshold in a bit– some more steps, yes, almost there– yes, you have to jump.”

Regulus sighed. “Give me an indication, Potter, of how high.”

“It’s just a normal threshold.”

“Define normal–”

“Just jump, Black, it’s like a threshold you’d encounter by a door. You’ll survive.”

“Easy for you to say– you’re not blindfolded!”

“Yes, yes, now, jump–”

He did, and was oddly satisfied that he'd accomplished it without tripping, when he suddenly realised he could've probably just walked over the threshold normally. He stopped in his tracks and heard Potter snigger. That was when he realised he was being screwed around.

"*Potter*," he hissed, "I could've just stepped over it."

Potter roared with laughter. "So nice for you to come to that realisation," he laughed.

"No more pranks!" Regulus shot him immediately. "Or I'll hex you into the middle of next week."

"Okay, okay!" Potter said in surrender. "I'll play nice– I don't want to end up like Thorne."

"Ha ha."

At some point, after following some directions to go to the left or the right, Regulus arrived at the first goblet.

"You'll have to touch it," Potter said. And so he did, albeit reluctantly.

The goblet started to speak. *"If you could have any magical creature as a pet, what would it be?"*

Regulus groaned. What was this – a bloody tea party?

"Answer the question, Black," Potter shot him.

"Err – I don't know, do I? - perhaps… perhaps a Demiguise. They're nice – they tell the future."

"Makes sense," responded Potter. "I'd go for a phoenix – comes back to life, looks cool, has healing power…"

"Yes, dandy as that is," Regulus said sarcastically, "I believe I am to answer these questions, right?"

"Well," Potter said, and Regulus could *hear* him smirk, "the assignment clearly states I have to answer them as well…"

"No," Regulus shot him, "that makes no sense – then why would you have to complete this track as well –" and that was when the realisation hit him "–oh, you bloody cheat! We had to *choose* who was going to complete this track, weren't we?"

Potter laughed. “You didn’t bother to read the parchment, Black – it serves you right.”

Regulus cursed under his breath and continued walking. He should’ve known, Potter was widely known for being a pranker. He even had a club with his Sirius and the other two nitwits. *The Marauders*, they called themselves.

“Yes – just go ahead, to the right here, yes – and now, turn in a circle–”

“Very funny, Potter.”

“–I’m serious, you have to turn in a circle–”

“You’re definitely yanking my wand, Potter–”

“–I’m not yanking anything, Black, it is very clear; you have to turn in a circle–”

So Regulus did. And then Potter burst out in laughter again.

“You bloody tosser!” Regulus roared. “ *Stop* taking the piss out of me – I swear –”

“Alright, alright! I’ll stop, nothing but serious from now on – I promise – but boys, do *you* have a foul mouth – not very worthy of a Black, do you think?”

Regulus snorted. “Have you met my brother, the Black heir?”

Potter laughed, but was cut off by another goblet.

“*What is the first thing you would do if you had an Invisibility Cloak?”*

For some reason, Potter thought this was a very funny question.

“I’d sneak away from this stupid project,” Regulus shot him. “You?”

“Understandable,” Potter retorted. “I’d… sneak into the Slytherin Dungeons and redecorate it with Gryffindor colours. Just for fun.”

“You clearly aim high, Potter,” Regulus said sarcastically.

After more rights and lefts and an (according to Potter) actual high obstacle over which he had to jump, another question was asked.

“If you could trade places with anyone for a day, who would it be and why?”

“Javai Gergovitch, definitely,” Potter said, referring to the Chudley Cannon’s Chaser. “Just imagine being able to play a game at his level, in such a stadium…”

Regulus nodded understandably. Potter and him might not have a lot in common – they both liked Quidditch.

“You?”

Before Regulus could stop himself, he answered earnestly – or perhaps it was some kind of magic around the track that forced him to be honest. “A muggle.”

Potter laughed in a stunned fashion. “You – a Muggle?”

Regulus decided to just go with it and nodded. “Yes, why not? It’d be fascinating to see the world through their eyes - not knowing about magic… How do they explain magic? How do they perceive the world? How is life without being…” He stopped, not wanting to reveal the real thought at the foundation of this idea.

“Without being a member of one of the wizarding world’s most prominent families?” Potter filled in. He was right – but Regulus didn’t want him to know, so offered something else instead.

“Without being able to perform magic,” he shot, resuming his pace down the track quickly.

“Which holiday memory are you the most fond of?”

“You first,” Regulus shot him. “At least you owe me that after everything you’ve pulled on me tonight.”

“I think… the Quidditch Cup Final with my dad last year,” he said.

“Wow, you were there?” Regulus asked in awe. “Brilliant. How was it?”

“Unbelievable - we went to see the final match, between Syria and Madagascar. It was amazing… It’s really made me think about perhaps pursuing a career in Quidditch.”

Regulus nodded. “You should.”

“You’re a good seeker, though – wouldn’t you want to take up a career in Quidditch?”

Regulus scoffed, the image of his mother in his mind when declaring his envisaged future prospects. She’d be furious – no, the Black boys were supposed to go into the Ministry, into politics, a place where power was wielded. “No, that’s not for me.”

“What about you – best holiday memory?”

Regulus thought about this – he’d never been that fond of either the summer or the Christmas holidays; the former for numerous reasons, the latter because it was always crammed with social events.

“No nice memories of the beach?” Potter suggested.

Regulus shook his head. “No, I don’t like the beach.”

“Who doesn’t like the beach?” Potter shot him. “And didn’t you guys used to stay at some kind of beach house every summer holiday?”

It was that he was currently wearing a blindfold, for otherwise Regulus would’ve looked at Potter with stunned eyes. The tilted head and raised eyebrows gave his feelings away, though.

“Yes,” he answered stiffly. “How do you know about that?”

“…Sirius?”

Of course. For a split second he’d forgotten that Potter was his brother’s best friend and that they probably discussed every trivial, stupid detail of their lives. It made Regulus instantly very uncomfortable not knowing what Potter exactly knew about the Black brother’s lives behind closed doors.

“Anyhow, that was ages ago. We’ve been spending the holidays at my Uncle’s for ages now.”

“You mean for three years - hardly qualifies as ‘ages’, does it?”

Regulus snapped his face towards Potter’s voice. “You’re awfully well informed.”

“It was pretty obvious that something had happened the summer between first and second year, when we saw Sirius on the train…”

Nosy prick. It was evident he was trying to pry.

“Oh, well,” Regulus shook it off as naturally as possible. He went through his memories, looking for a happy one. “My fondest memory would be … the Quidditch games, I guess.” He nodded, thinking about Cissy and Sirius, Regulus forced to be the Keeper, Sirius and Cissy teaming up against him…

Regulus continued his pace.

“Only two more goblets left,” Potter said encouragingly.

“If you were a ghost at Hogwarts, where would you haunt?”

“You first, Black.”

“The Astronomy Tower, definitely – quiet, nice view, I can get to scare some snogging couples.”

He heard Potter grin. “Good one. I’d go for the Quidditch pitch - make sure the Lions win every Cup.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be all ‘we win due to our *competences* and *skills*’?” Regulus shot him. “Where’s your Gryffindor honour, Potter?”

“Ha, ha.”

He eventually made his way, going left, right, right, left and turning around, to the last question. Regulus was quite glad with the way things had gone so far - light questions, only tickling the surface of possibly very deep waters. It wasn’t as bad as he’d expected to be around Potter, anyway - they avoided sensitive topics and it was all very superficial. Besides, Regulus was also a bit intrigued by the bloke that had practically stolen his brother’s heart - or at least his loyalties. The situation grew unpleasant, though, with the last question, leaving Regulus discomposed and uneasy.

“What’s the strangest dream you’ve ever had?”

Regulus stiffened. His life was currently nothing but strange dreams - or well, terrifying, revolting, terror-striking nightmares. There was no part he dwelled on in his dreams that was not strange

Such a wonderful boy. Shhh. You’re doing great. You’re alright - such a wonderful boy…

Apparently it had been silent for too long, because Potter’s voice revealed an awkwardness that was a complete novelty to this evening.

“I will … start then, I guess? I once dreamt that I was playing Quidditch on a broomstick, and Dumbledore was the Bludger. It was weird.”

Regulus let out a very forced, small laugh. “I’d reckon.”

“And you? Weirdest dream?”

He couldn’t possibly disclose anything that was close to the truth, so decided to test his theory that the track forced him to answer honestly.

“I once dreamt I was at a Black dinner party and they served tofu and Muggle wine only…” It was a stupid lie, but he was too stressed out to come up with anything else - it was a miracle he came up with anything, to be honest.

“Great,” Potter said in a tone that sounded … almost concerned. The joyful edge to his voice had disappeared. “Well, we’re done - that was it.”

Regulus quickly took off the blindfold and let his eyes get accustomed to the unnatural amount of light making his way into his brain. He winced and then carefully looked around, realising that the others hadn’t completed the track yet.

“Good job, Mr. Potter and Mr. Black,” McGonagall said once they’d awkwardly made their way towards the door of the classroom, where she was standing, overlooking the process at the tracks. “The first ones to finish - now, tonight’s task reflects the project’s objectives very strongly: you are ought to get acquainted and to be able to trust each other; which is exactly what you have been doing and showing tonight. I grant five points to Slytherin and Gryffindor for your cooperative behaviour.”

Regulus nodded.

“Thank you, Professor,” Potter said.

“You’re excused - I do advise you to take the project more seriously, it’s only a matter of weeks before the first assignment is due.”

“Of course, Professor.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

They quickly made their way out of the classroom and walked to the staircases in silence. Regulus felt strange - he had a hard time making sense of his ideas and emotions, feeling they were all mixing up, getting intertwined in odd ways. Relieved that the meeting had been alright - almost fun, actually… So bloody tired from not sleeping properly for ages. Inspired and hopeful by Thorne's meeting… Guilty, ashamed, distressed and honestly, defeated, by the realisation that he apparently couldn't outrun it all - not even for the duration of a stupid unity meeting. He sighed.

"You okay?" Potter asked, his eyebrows frowned questionably.

"Yes, brilliant," Regulus shot him, although a tad weakly for his liking. "Well - until the next one, I guess."

He nodded in goodbye at Potter who's way would part now that Regulus had to go down to the Dungeon and he upstairs to the Gryffindor Tower.

"Later," he heard Potter's voice in the distance.

Chapter 9: Of Poison & Wine

Dear Reggie,

I'm pleased to hear you've been doing alright, although, if I were to believe the rumours, you're doing excellent. I've heard from not one, but two different sources, that your Defence teacher is particularly impressed with you. Lucius heard directly from Professor Thorne, and even Bella has come across the rumour, via Rodolphus, who apparently heard from his brother about your recent duel victory. Now I know you prefer to avoid the spotlight, but it's a good thing to be noticed by the right people - and Victor Thorne very much falls in that category. He's well-connected at the Ministry and beyond. So, keep it up, Reggie!

How are you managing with classes and that unity project? Any interesting developments? Just a couple of weeks and you'll have completed your first assignment, and it will be Christmas soon after. I always forget how swiftly the time passes between the summer recess and the Christmas holidays. Soon, we will be seeing each other regularly again, and it's just a matter of months until the wedding. We will need to discuss some formalities during the Christmas holidays, particularly regarding your role, and that of your brother, in the ceremony.

On a separate note, I realise this is somewhat short notice, but Lucius would very much like to meet in Hogsmeade during the Halloween weekend. Do you think you might be able to spare an hour or two? He mentioned the Hog's Head at one o'clock. Let me know if that suits your schedule. Lucius could have written himself, but since I was already planning to write to you, I thought it more convenient to include the invitation here.

Love,
Your ever-favourite cousin,
Cissy.

P.S.: Interesting things are happening, don't you think? Three attacks in less than a week! Just a matter of time before people realise Minchum is all bark and no bite, like we discussed.

"A letter from your secret lover?"

Regulus jumped in surprise at the sound of Potter's voice and, as a result, dropped his bag and letter. He cursed and collected his

belongings, shooting Potter an irritated look.

“None of your business, Potter.”

“Oeh, touchy, it *is* a love letter, then-”

“Why do I keep bumping into you? Don’t you have better places to be?”

Potter grinned, gesturing at the entrance of the Great Hall. “A man has to eat.”

Regulus shot him another irritated glare, which did nothing to reduce his appalling happiness. “And, last time I checked,” Potter continued, “we live in the same castle with food served at set times - chances of running into each other are rather high.”

“Yes, well, bon appetit,” Regulus said, quickly making his way towards the Slytherin table. He saw Potter saluting him ridiculously in the corner of his eye before his attention was drawn by Evan, Barty, Isa, Amaryllis and Melania already digging into their dinner.

“What did the lunatic want?” Evan asked.

“Do we need to hex him?” Barty asked eagerly. “I’ve just found a book for Defence with some beautiful spells in it.”

Regulus smirked and looked at Isa. “Do you think we’ll ever get used to Barty referencing books?”

This earned him a smack on the head with a spoon from Barty and a roar of laughter from Isa.

“But no - nothing special, just ran into him,” Regulus explained quickly.

He was serious, though - he kept running into bloody Potter all over the castle; his training would start once Potter’s was over making them meet in the locker rooms, he’d have a block of Transfiguration just after the fifth-year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs left the classroom, he ran into him in the library with his brother and so on. It was annoying, like there used to be a very thick barrier between them and somehow it seemed to be slowly vanishing, leaving a closeness that felt both suffocating and stirring. Or he was just imagining it - it’s not like they really *were* close, they didn’t do anything together apart from the stupid ASS-meetings which were mostly superficial ordeals. Still,

he was used to Potter being nothing more than a distant menace, an annoying and inaccessible bloke that mostly managed to stay out of his way. And somehow, he didn't feel like that anymore.

"So, are we all set for tomorrow?" Amaryllis asked excitedly.

"Yes," Evan said proudly. "The booze, the music, the snacks, the decorations - we've thought of it all."

"Perhaps Dumbledore should've just let all houses organise a party," Isa said. "The level of Intra-House Unity accomplished over some garlands and liquor…"

It was true - somehow Evan and Barty had managed to join forces with Avery and Mulciber after the second meeting with Thorne. The fifth-years had in turn rounded up a collaboration with the seventh-years and well… there probably wasn't a Slytherin not planning to go to the party. On top of that, the party planning had led to the expansion of their usual group of four - Amaryllis and Melania being the new regulars to their gang of friends.

"Well, it's been ages since we've had a good party," Melania chipped in.

"And with a bit of luck, we'll have another one in two weeks," Amaryllis added, hinting at the Quidditch match between Slytherin and Gryffindor in the middle of November.

"Ah, this year is going to be brilliant," Barty sighed contendly.

Regulus silently finished his shepherd's pie, feeling that for him, this year wasn't very brilliant, and probably wouldn't be either in the near future.

*****

The next day, Regulus made his way to Hogsmeade with his friends. They were armed with gloves and had their scarves partially wrapped around their faces - although it would probably be a couple of weeks before the first snowflakes would touch the Hogwarts grounds, there was a strong, chill wind blowing and there had not been a beam of sunlight for days.

"Bloody hell, it's cold," Isa cursed, her voice muffed by her scarf.

"Can't we go to the Three Broomsticks already?" Amaryllis

complained.

“We need to go to Zonko’s,” Barty said.

“I need new quills,” Isa complained. “And I’ve run out of several potions supplies already…”

“I need some stuff for Herbology,” Regulus joined in.

“Even on a Hogsmeade weekend you two are all homework and classes,” Barty said, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, and not just any Hogsmeade weekend - it’s a special day, today!” Evan backed him up.

“Yes, thrilling as it all is,” Isa shot him, “it’ll be ages before we get to shop for supplies again, won’t it?”

And she was right - so they decided to split up. Regulus went with Isa and Amaryllis to buy their supplies, and Barty, Evan and Melania went to Zonko’s.

“What do you need from Dogweed and Deathcap anyway?” Amaryllis asked, shivering from the cold. They had decided to go to the Herbology shop first.

“New gloves,” Regulus answered. “It’ll take days to get new ones by owl and we’re here anyway…”

Amaryllis and Isa decided to hover at the front of the shop while Regulus quickly made his way through the mass of people to the counter. It was clear that the shop wasn’t equipped for this number of students, as he had to push his way through interested third years who were on their first trip (and probably wanted to explore every shop in the village) and some older Ravenclaws. Regulus recognised Thompson and gave her a stiff nod in greeting before ordering his gloves at the counter. Thompson answered with a polite but small smile while her friends eyed the scene in silence. After he’d paid the owner - a short, plumb woman - for the gloves he needed, he quickly returned to the shop’s exit and realised that Isa and Amaryllis were bickering about something - but in hushed tones.

“What’s the matter?” he asked curiously. “Something happened?”

“No,” Isa said, shooting Amaryllis a very stern look. “It’s nothing. Let’s go.”

Clearly, it was a touchy subject, so Regulus decided to let it go and accompanied the two girls to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop and to J. Pippin's Potions afterwards. They'd just exited the shop to defy the cold again, when he heard another heated, whispered back-and-forth between them.

"What's all this about?" Regulus asked, quite irritated. If they didn't want to include him in this stupid argument, they'd better not bring it up while he was in earshot every time.

"Well, Isa here says you 'don't concern yourself with these childish matters'-"

"Yes - like *he* knows or cares whether-"

"What's it about?" Regulus turned his head towards Amaryllis, blocking Isa out.

"Well," she answered, hands on her hips, "Melania was wondering - well, she'd really want to… she was just thinking, you know, if-"

"Oh, come off it!" Isa cut her off, annoyed. "Melania wants to know whether Evan would snog her."

Regulus froze awkwardly and raised eyebrows, shooting Isa a questioning look. "Er…"

"Told you to keep this nonsense to yourself," Isa shot Amaryllis.

Regulus tried to wrap his head around this information - so Melania wanted to snog Evan. Regulus was sure that Evan'd never snogged someone, or the entire castle would probably know. He'd never heard him, or Barty for that matter, talk about wanting to snog anyone, though. But then it struck him that they perhaps did talk about that stuff, but not so much with Regulus around, because that often meant Isa was in tow, too. Objectively, Regulus now realised, Evan would probably snog anyone that wasn't a dork or a Gryffindor.

He shrugged and looked at the anticipating face of Amaryllis. "I think he wouldn't mind."

"Ha, told you!" she said, slapping Isa playfully on her shoulder. "I *knew* they'd talk about this kind of thing-"

"Err," Regulus interrupted, scratching his head awkwardly. "It's not like that-"

But Amaryllis seemed too delighted to hear his objections and hopped her way down the street, on her way to the Three Broomsticks.

“She’s never going to let this go,” Isa groaned. “I think she wants Melania to snog Evan so she has an opportunity to go snog Barty…”

Regulus crooked his eyebrows. “This is … a thing, now?” he asked tentatively.

“Apparently,” Isa answered dryly. “But hey - don’t you need to go to the Hog’s Head? It’s two minutes past one already.”

“Oh, shit,” Regulus cursed. “I’ll see you at the Three Broomstick later, alright?”

Isa nodded, waving a rather stressed Regulus off, who’d turned on his heels and quickly headed towards the Hog’s Head. Shit, he thought, I’m meeting *Lucius Malfoy*, Narcissa’s soon-to-be husband and I’m late… Cursing under his breath, he quickly entered the small pub. It wasn’t a very likely place for Lucius Malfoy to meander around - the pub was widely known to attract rather dodgy people and creatures, and it surprised Regulus that Lucius would put his esteemed reputation at stake being associated with them. Besides, it wasn’t a very hygienic place either, something that must bother someone with such shiny hair.

“Ah, there you are, Regulus,” he heard Lucius’s voice. Regulus, still in the process of smoothing out his cloak and shaking the cold out of his hair, looked up and realised that he wasn’t meeting with Lucius alone.

“Oh, hello,” he said, rather stunned, looking at the faces of Lucius, Corban Yaxley, Dolohov and both the Lestrange brothers.

Corban was Lucius’s best friend - they’d been in the same year at Hogwarts - and Regulus had seen quite a lot of him throughout the years, being the best mate of his favourite cousin’s fiance. However, he was seven years older, a fact that didn’t really yield many topics of conversation, so they’d be friendly but also very glad to give up each other’s company for other people that were around.

Rodolphus Lestrange was a man that made Regulus uneasy. He was handsome - tall, muscular, dark eyes, dark, wavy hair - but there was something unsettling about him. Regulus rationally knew this was a given, seeing he shared the bed with Bella, but it did surprise him almost every time he found himself in his company. Rabastan, being

his younger brother, looked much like him, but was less intimidating.

They were all intimidating to some degree, though, and Regulus was very aware of the fact that he was, by far, the youngest among them - Rabastan and Dolohov being at least of age or even eighteen, and Lucius and Rodolphus twenty-one or twenty-two. Regulus was merely a boy among the group of men. And now he was late, too…

“Sorry I’m late,” he apologetically said right away, “I was held up–”

“It’s fine, Regulus,” Lucius said kindly. “It was on short notice, anyway – I’m glad you could make it. Come, take a seat.”

Regulus sat down across Lucius, between Rabastan and Corban, and took a look around the pub. There were just two other people, cloaked and partially invisible because of it, bent over the table, heads stuck together and suspiciously whispering. It really was an odd, dirty place.

“I chose this pub,” Lucius said, apparently reading Regulus’s thoughts, “because it won’t attract too much attention *and* I’ve casted a silencing charm to make sure we’re not overheard.”

Regulus nodded shyly.

“A drink?” Lucius asked.

Regulus eyed the glasses of Firewhiskey and Mead his company was drinking and, a little bit embarrassed, said: “Yes, please, Butterbeer would be nice.”

Dolohov and Lestrange sniggered, but Lucius ignored it and raised his hand, mouthing “*Butterbeer*” to the bar behind Regulus.

“Now that we are all gathered,” Lucius continued. “There are several important matters I wish to address. Now - I trust you’ve all been following the news closely?”

Everyone nodded or otherwise affirmed.

“Excellent. Well, with Minchum at the helm, I regret to inform you that the revolution finds itself in rather precarious circumstances.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows, very curious about where this conversation was going.

“I know that each of you is sympathetic to the cause, and I would like to ask, whether, when the time comes, you will formally pledge your

allegiance to it?"

"How would we do that?" Dolohov asked, very eagerly. His eyes were fixed intently on Lucius. He was clearly hanging on his every word.

"Everything in its own time, Antonin," he said with a sly smile. "For now, I merely wish to ascertain whether you are truly, without a doubt, committed to joining the cause."

"Of course," Dolohov replied at once, his voice filled with urgency and an eagerness to prove himself. "Of course I am."

"Me too," Rabastan said quickly.

Apparently Rodolphus and Corban's allegiance was already assured or just unquestioned, because all the gazes skipped them and steered towards Regulus instead.

He shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "Yes, obviously," he said quickly.

"Then, let us continue," Lucius said. "Now, the revolution as it stands, has always seemingly been unguided - just a collection of like-minded individuals or groups sharing similar ambitions, concerns and grievances for the future of our world."

Regulus noticed that Dolohov and Rabastan's mouths were agape in awe, apparently delighted to be privy to Lucius's words. Regulus was also intrigued - *very* intrigued by the conversation. Clearly Lucius knew a lot more than Regulus had realised. He talked like someone deeply embedded in the revolution, like someone that'd witnessed its every development from the front lines.

"Now, of course, a revolution - an uprising - cannot succeed without strong leadership. It requires a competent, powerful, and intelligent leader."

Regulus nodded in agreement - he felt this, too. Up to this point, the 'revolution', apart from some public statements and scattered attempts to block the passing of ridiculous laws, had merely been a collection of uncoordinated attacks. How much more effective they could be with someone leading them, navigating the treacherous waters of politics and directing their efforts towards a common goal…

"I'm delighted to announce," Lucius broke the tense silence, "such a leader already exists. He is among us, though awaiting the right

moment to reveal himself. When that time comes, he will require your unwavering support."

“Have you met Him?” Dolohob asked, admiration lacing his voice.

Lucius nodded. “Yes, I have - He is an extraordinarily powerful, capable and intelligent individual.”

“When will we meet Him?” Rabastan asked eagerly.

Regulus rolled his eyes silently at the redundancy of the question - it was clear, wasn’t it? He would reveal himself once the movement had solidified, once they had gained sufficient ground… Only then it’d be prudent to formally start the revolution. To act too soon would risk the movement’s collapse before it had even truly begun. No, Regulus felt it - they were working towards something, things were stirring, but they weren’t quite there yet… But they would be, soon…

“Once the time is right,” Lucius decided to answer cryptically. “And when that time comes, I expect all of you to play your part.”

Regulus felt Dolohov’s stare from the corner of his eyes - he knew what he was thinking. Regulus was only fourteen, a boy still, and yet Lucius expected him to play a part. Rabastan clearly thought the same, sniggering silently.

“Now, now, Rabastan, Antonin,” Lucius's gaze sharpened as it fell on them. “Regulus here possesses a flair for politics and a skill with his wand that you could have merely dreamed of at his age.”

Dolohov and Lestrange looked like he just slapped them in the face.

“I have no doubt that Regulus will be crucial in the revolution - and it is of the utmost importance that we avoid petty rivalries and instead remain united in purpose and strength. Now, I understand that you have all been attending the so-called ‘duel clubs’-” Yaxley and Rodolphus chuckled “-and I expect you to continue doing so. Apart from this, keep your eyes and ears open and be on your guard.”

Dolohov and Lestrange eyed him questionably.

“They know we are uniting,” Lucius clarified. “And they’ll try to thwart us in any possible way.”

Everyone was silent, taking in the important words from Lucius in awe.

“Now, I would like to propose a toast. Raise your glass, gentlemen, and toast to the revolution.”

“To the revolution!” they chored, clinking their glasses. Regulus took an awkward sip from his Butterbeer.

“Now,” said Croban delightedly once he had downed his entire glass, “tell me, how’s the birds at Hogwarts these days?”

Regulus stiffened slightly at the table, feeling the weight of the conversation shifting toward something he’d rather avoid - he didn’t know anything about girls and he was certain that all the people at the table had plenty to say on the matter. He pretended to be interested in his Butterbeer and decided to play the silent observer.

“They’re alright,” Dolohov said, a smug grin stretching across his face, the kind that implied there was much more to it than ‘alright.’

“Come on, Antonin,” the younger Lestrange chuckled. “Don’t be modest - you’ve been keeping quite a few of them busy, haven’t you?”

Dolohov smirked. “I do have a lot of these study sessions going on, yes…”

The others around the table erupted in laughter and Regulus tried his best to pretend to find it funny as well.

“So tell me, can they even study?” Corban grinned.

“Oh, no, definitely not,” Dolohov answered mockingly, “but they know how to put their talents to good use.”

Another round of laughter broke out, during which Lestrange barked: “He’s even gone as far as holding these study sessions with Ravenclaws.” He paused in an attempt to build anticipation, and was successful. The others eyed him curiously. “Turns out they’re a bit cleverder but, once you get them alone, they’re just like the rest.” The table howled with laughter again, Dolohov looking very pleased with himself while Rodolphus smacked him on his back in hilarity and Corban clapped his hands in delight.

Once the laughter had died out more or less, Corban turned his head towards Regulus. “And how’s the birds in fourth year?”

Regulus very much did not want to be drawn into this discussion - besides, he had no idea how he was supposed to answer this question.

He was about to either retort something undoubtedly daft or about to choke - he wasn't sure which - when Lucius came to the rescue.

"Now, don't embarrass him, Corban," he said with a sly smile. "I think Regulus is more the 'classic' kind of chap. And don't forget that he's practically destined to end up with Isadora Nott."

Corban and the older Lestrange whistled. "A bit too young for my liking, but she's already easy on the eyes," Corban said suggestively.

Rabastan sniggered and nodded. "Oh yes, she'll be … ripe for the picking soon." He made a very rude gesture with his hands.

This earned him another round of howling laughter, but Regulus did not join in - he felt repulsed by the way they were talking about her and he was strangely disgruntled by the fact they didn't realise Isa wasn't just beautiful but also certainly more intelligent than all of them combined. Apart from that, he was very aware of the fact that this bloke was his cousin's husband and clearly showing an unhealthy interest in other, and much younger, girls.

Apparently his resignation showed, for Rabastan playfully nudged his shoulder and said: "Look at him, getting all worked up - I think Black here fancies her-"

"Enough, now," Lucius cut him off sharply, clearly sensing Regulus's tension. "Now - I have some other matters to attend to - let's call this meeting a day." He rose from his chair and looked at all of them authoritatively. "Remember - eyes in your back, ears perked, vigilant at all times."

They said their goodbyes and then exited the pub, Regulus still feeling rather agitated by the course the conversation had taken. Just when he was about to part from the group - he knew that Lucius, Corban and the older Lestrange brother would undoubtedly apparate away and he was not eager to stay behind with Dolohov and the younger Lestrange - he saw someone rounding the corner, someone whose set of brown eyes landed on Regulus and the group in a mix of curiosity and shock. Regulus shut his eyes in gratitude that everyone had their back turned towards him, because, *naturally* he had to run into no one less than James bloody Potter here - and where Potter was, Sirius would undoubtedly be. And Sirius Black in the company of Lucius Malfoy, Corban Yaxley, Antonin Dolohov and both Lestrange brothers was the recipe for an unparalleled catastrophe, *especially* if they were with his younger brother.

Regulus held Potter's gaze on purpose and shook his head subtly, before signing something with his eyes that came close to *get him away from here, NOW, this is going to end ugly*. Regulus could almost jump into the air in gratitude that Potter seemingly understood the message and turned on his heels swiftly, grabbing the only part of Sirius that had just gone around the corner - his arm - and steered him away from there, probably under a false pretext.

Regulus sighed in relief, said a final goodbye to the group and quickly made his way to the Three Broomsticks where his friends would undoubtedly be. And indeed, when he entered the bar, he was met with the sight of Isa, Barty, Evan, Amaryllis and Melania amicably drinking Butterbeer at a table. Regulus shook off the uneasy feelings that the end of the meeting had left and joined his friends.

"Ah, nice of you to join us at last," Barty grinned. "We were worried you'd have kicked the bucket somewhere."

Regulus snorted. "No, no kicking the bucket today." He ordered a Butterbeer and happily listened to his friends' bickering about what snacks to order the House Elves to make for the party. They apparently had decided on the snacks days ago, but there were too many, so they had to make a selection. He looked at Isa carefully - the Butterbeer leaving a small blush on her cheeks, her slim fingers playing with a lock of golden hair - and thought about the revolting things that the former crowd had been hinting at. If she knew the way these people thought about her…

"Stop staring, you love-sick idiot," Evan whispered in his ear, making him jump from his seat.

"What?" Regulus asked, stunned.

"Stop staring," he hissed, "and just snog her at the party tonight."

Reglus sighed and shook his head in disbelief - why didn't *anyone* understand that he was in no way romantically interested in Isadora Nott?

"C'mon," Evan begged, still whispering. "It'll earn me 5 galleons!"

"You've *betted* on me and Isa snogging?" Regulus hissed in cold anger. "If you're that stupid you *deserve* to be ripped off."

"What are you whispering about?" Isa asked, her eyebrows raised in suspicion.

“Nothing,” the boys said in unison, although Regulus with an exasperated eye-roll and Evan with a very smug grin plastered onto his face.

The others were still bickering about which snacks to include, but had at least arrived at the conclusion that they’d make a list and vote on a top five.

Evan took a piece of parchment out of his pocket. “Care to lend me a quill?” he shot Isa who had just bought a batch at Scrivenshaft’s. She was absorbed into an apparently fascinating conversation with Melania about eclairs and absentmindedly threw him her small purse. Evan opened it and was just rummaging through it - Merlin knew how much stuff was in there since Isa had casted an Extension Charm on it - when Regulus’s attention was drawn by his brother’s deep voice.

“Brother,” Sirius said darkly, making Regulus’s head snap around.

“Brother,” he answered, in the identical voice and tone. He rose from his seat and took a couple of steps, forcing some distance between Sirius and his group of friends.

“Where were you?” Sirius interrogated. Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew quickly joined him.

“What do you mean?”

“You weren’t with them-” he nodded at Regulus’s friends at the table behind them “-so, where were you?”

“I hardly believe that’s any of your business,” Regulus said coldly. Apparently Potter hadn’t ratted him out - or, yet, at least.

“I saw some interesting figures roaming the streets some time ago,” Sirius continued, his eyes squeezed in suspicion. It was that Regulus knew his brother was rubbish at Occlumency, for someone might’ve believed he was trying to read his mind.

“Did you now?”

“Yes - Malfoy, Yaxley and Lestrange.”

“Oh well, these *are* interesting -”

“Stop yanking my wand, Regulus.”

“Look, Sirius, it is none of your business whom I meet with,” Regulus

said eventually. He tried very much not to look at anyone else but his brother, who was about to continue their argument when they were both taken off guard by the sound of shattering glass and the profane cursing of Isa.

“Oh for *fuck’s* sake, Rosier, you bloody fool!” she looked at the glass in a pool of purple liquid, and Regulus recognised it immediately - it was Dreamless sleep potion.

“What’s that stuff even?” Evan shot her, apparently not as sharp as Regulus.

“None of your business,” Isa responded, her voice sharp as razors. Still, her meaningful look at Regulus probably wouldn’t go past an observant bystander. Luckily, Sirius wasn’t a very observant bloke, so Regulus sighed silently in relief.

“You’ve got like … dozens of them!” Evan said, still rummaging the bag they’d fallen out from, a clinking noise coming out of it. Isa quickly snapped the bag out of his hands, shot Regulus another nervous glance, and took a quill out.

“I believe *this* is what you were looking for?” she asked coldly, composed again.

“Yes,” Evan shot her, and mouthed an almost silent *‘girls’* afterwards.

“C’mon mate,” Potter said, grabbing Sirius by the shoulder, but eyeing Regulus warily. “Let’s go.”

“Be careful, brother,” Sirius shot him before he finally exited the pub, “whom you associate with.”

Regulus slowly let his gaze trail over Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew. “You too, brother.”

*****

The party was a ‘raging success’ - at least, that is what other people said afterwards. In Regulus’s case, however, it was mostly sentiments like ‘chaos’, ‘excessive drinking’ and eventually ‘disaster’ that crossed his mind.

After the Halloween Feast in the Great Hall, all Slytherins made their way down the Dungeons excitedly. That no one outside Slytherin had picked up on the party really was testament to the segregated nature

of Salazar's house. There was an uneasy twenty minutes in which people clearly had to get into the mood, but once more people had joined, Dolohov had turned the music up and people had been pouring (illegal) drinks, they had quite the party going.

In his rather short life, Regulus had seen the effects of alcohol in many different and often equally disturbing ways. It was always the liquor that made his parents fight at social events like a pair of Muggles since they'd drunkenly lost their wands, or have his Uncle end up in a small, conspicuous place with someone else than his wife, or have Uncle Alphard duelling with some innocent bystander, sending them both off to St. Mungo's. No, Regulus was wise enough to know to steer away from the poison.

But it was great fun looking at the liquid's effect on his housemates. This was by far the first party to be hosted in the Slytherin Dungeons, but it was the first time that Regulus's friends were the main organisers and therefore the centre of attention. Sure, Dolohov, Lestrange and some other seventh-years had provided most of the drinks that mattered, but they seemed glad to pass the wheel to younger years, reaping the fruits of the fifth-years' labour without putting in much effort. Barty and Evan were delighted, of course, since their new career path seemed to mostly entail becoming Slytherin's most famous party planners. And so far, they had done a great job - there were several tables with plates of cauldron cakes, chocolate frogs, caramelised fruits, custard tarts, prosciutto-wrapped figs and enchanted crisps. There was one main table that functioned as a bar, with glasses of Firewhiskey, Magnificent Mead, Butterbeer and pumpkin juice. There was also a very large bowl of punch, undoubtedly spiked by Avery and Mulciber. Apart from the food, the common room was decorated with floating pumpkins, flashing serpents, Halloween-styled banners and canons of confetti that exploded if you approached them from a certain angle - much to the dismay of a group of sixth-year girls that ended up showering in it on accident. And, very important - the wizarding wireless was live, currently blasting a song from The Hobgoblins through the common room, directing people to the dancefloor.

Regulus sat down at a sofa providing a splendid view of the spectacle in front of him - the dancefloor to the right, a seating area on the left where people would go once the dancing had tired them out or to have private conversations, the table with drinks in the middle.

Severus settled down next to him. It didn't go past Regulus that Severus didn't drink either.

“Not a drinker?” Regulus asked curiously, eying the pumpkin juice in Severus’s hands.

“Neither are you,” Severus shot him.

Regulus shrugged. “No,” he said quite darkly, “I’ve seen what it can do.”

Severus nodded knowingly. “Same.”

Regulus didn’t know much about Severus’s background, beyond the fact that he had a Muggle father and a witch of a mother. He’d seen his parents once, years ago, and the memory of the small, huddled witch berated by her shabby and seemingly aggressive husband was clarified to another level by the fact that Severus apparently didn’t drink. Regulus often felt sorry for him - he was very clever and well-read, but he had the air of someone that didn’t quite belong anywhere. The contrast between Severus’s shabby robes and Regulus’s perfectly tailored ones of the finest fabric, didn’t go past him. Apparently Regulus wasn’t the only one who couldn’t outrun his problems.

Now, they sat down on the sofa next to each other, drinking their non-alcoholic drinks, taking in the scenes in the Dungeon as if they were in a Muggle cinema. It was marvellous - Regulus honestly didn’t know where to look.

On the dance floor, there was Isa dancing with Amaryllis, whose dance moves mirrored her careless, optimistic self - she took over half of the space, having no eye for the people she bumped into or pushed aside, clearly sending Isa in a fit of laughter again and again. Isa caught Regulus’s gaze and smirked, then gestured to him to join them.

Regulus shot her a sarcastic look that clearly stated *no, thank you very much* , and relocated his gaze to the improvised bar, all the while feeling the curious set of eyes belonging to Severus on him, clearly having picked up the exchange between Regulus and his best friend.

“No fan of dancing?”

Regulus snorted. “No, thanks.”

The ‘bar’ was now dominated by Lestrange, Dolohov, Avery and Evan. Evan was pretending to be able to hold his drink, for he tossed off a glass of Firewhiskey in one move, all the while Melania was eyeing them in admiration from afar with a bored Sabrina Selwyn in tow.

After a while, Melania walked over to Evan, making Regulus sit up in anticipation, hoping he'd have a front seat to the girl making a move on him.

"This ought to be fun," Regulus smirked.

He was disappointed, however, when Evan proved too thick to understand that the girl had joined them exclusively for his attention. He patted her on the shoulder awkwardly, like she was some kind of bloke, and handed her a glass of Mead. Regulus sniggered in silence, debating whether or not to go up there and give Evan the heads up. Before he had to decide, however, Melania somehow managed to drag Evan to the dance floor, drawing Regulus's and Severus's gaze to their dancing housemates once more.

"Oi, he's plastered," Severus said, eyeing Barty that was swaying his way to the dancefloor. Regulus suddenly remembered Amaryllis's interest in his friend, when, completely out of the blue, Barty grabbed said girl by the shoulders and plastered his lip onto hers. It was a very blunt, and rather rude, ordeal, and both Severus and Regulus groaned in vicarious shame. Still, Amaryllis didn't seem to mind, and indeed returned the favour eagerly. Regulus had no clue whether Amaryllis had any past experience, but it looked like a very clumsy, crass and awfully unromantic snogging session.

"Interesting," Severus noted. "And what's *that*?"

Regulus's attention was steered towards Evan and Melania, who had apparently interpreted their friends' snogging as a hint for likewise behaviour, and were now practically eating each other's faces off.

"Ew, disgusting," Regulus groaned at the sight.

"Copy that," Severus said.

They were too engrossed by the scene for Regulus to notice Isa being practically cornered by Mulciber on the dancefloor. It was, surprisingly, Dolohov and Lestrange that pointed it out.

"Evening, gentlemen," Dolohov said with a smirk, circling the Firewhiskey in his glass very confidently, while also taking in the sight of the dancefloor.

"Snape, Black," Lestrange greeted them. Neither Regulus nor Severus greeted them in return.

“It’d watch out, Black,” Dolohov warned, “if you don’t make a move on your girl soon, she’ll be taken.”

He nodded towards Mulciber who was awfully close to Isa, who in turn looked rather uncomfortable but clearly didn’t see a subtle way out through all the people.

Regulus was conflicted about what to do - he didn’t want to rise to the obvious bait by Dolohov; he didn’t want to feed rumours that he fancied Isa and in general didn’t like to be pushed around. But, it had become clear once more that morning how people thought about her and in that regard, it’d be very prudent to keep Isa as far away as possible from hungry predators in the form of teenagers like Mulciber. Regulus sighed and put his glass on the coffee table before he rose from his seat.

“Lads,” he nodded stiffly before making his way towards the dance floor.

Lestrange let out a howl of laughter while Dolohov whistled.

“Wow, look at you!” Isa said, beaming. “What got *you* up and dancing?”

Regulus tried not to look too warily at Mulciber, who’d been pushed aside by Regulus but still found a way to come very close to Isa.

“Ah, I see,” she smirked, “chivalry evidently isn’t dead.”

“No, Ms. Nott,” Regulus joked, “not in the Black household, at least.”

“In that case, you’d better ask me for a dance.”

Regulus shot her a sarcastic look. “Alright, alright,” he said when Isa was clearly about to put her foot down, “Ms. Isadora Elowen Nott, may I have the pleasure of sharing this dance with you?”

“Very well, Regulus Acturus Black,” she smirked, “you certainly may.”

Their dance was all but formal, though - Regulus knew how to ballroom dance, but the music blasting in the Dungeon didn’t really lend itself for that kind of dance, so they were just twirling and swirling around, laughing at each other’s idiotic moves. A rather long time had passed before Regulus realised that he’d given Isa much more than just one dance, but he was enjoying himself and it felt good to let himself go for once. He generally was a very reserved and

composed person - but the bloke goofing around with Isa and clearly not giving a rat's arse about anyone eyeing them, was another person altogether.

He was too entranced by Isa and the fun they were having to notice the jealous glances of half the Slytherin population *and* the alarming amount of alcohol their friends were downing in the rare moments they weren't snogging each other's faces off.

"Oh, Reg, enough, I have to take a bloody *breath*," Isa said, roaring with laughter when Regulus almost tripped over his own feet but miraculously managed to save himself from crashing onto the floor flat-faced, albeit in a ridiculously uncharming manner.

Regulus, laughing apologetically at his last move, nodded. "Yes, let's get a drink."

They went to the bar and saw that both Melania and Amaryllis were passed out on the sofa - either too tired or too drunk, or a combination of both. It must be very tiring to snog either Barty or Evan, Regulus chuckled.

"Oh, we can't leave them here like this," Isa said, worried. "Merlin knows what happens to them in the common room - I'll have to get them to the dorm."

"I can't get in," Regulus answered immediately.

"True," Isa said, thinking. "I'll ask some girls to help me, if you could just-"

Regulus would never know what favour she was asking of him, though, for at that precise moment, Evan toppled off a chair and hit the floor like a lifeless body. Sabrina Selwyn and a third-year girl shrieked in surprise, and the music was put down immediately by Lestrange.

"Bloody hell," Isa cursed, leaving her two friends on the sofa and sprinting to Evan's body with Regulus in the lead.

This wasn't normal - he actually looked… *dead*. He was completely pale, his eyes were wide open but not responding, he even felt… cold. Regulus, having no eyes for the mass of people gathering around them in a circle, immediately looked for the throbbing of his pulse with his fingers, but couldn't find it.

“Fuck, Evan, fuck,” he muttered, “what’s happening?” He drew his wand and quickly casted a pulse-tracking spell. “Make them shut up,” he ordered Isa, hinting at the gasping, shouting and talking crowd massed around them that made it impossible to hear anything.

“Shut your bloody mouths, y’all!” she roared.

Regulus casted the spell another time, perked his ears, and was utterly relieved to hear a heartbeat. It was faint, too faint, but it was a heartbeat all the same. He quickly assessed the rest of his body - a swelling on the side of his head due to the crash to the ground. He quickly cooled it with his wand, reducing the swelling immediately and then realised there was nothing else left for him to do - it was all in Madam Promfrey’s hands now.

“He’s gotta go up to the hospital wing,” Regulus said to Isa. He noticed that Dolohov and Lestrange - being the leading Slytherins - had also joined the first rank of the circle.

“We’ll take him,” Dolohov slurred, obviously having hit the bottle a bit too hard.

“Yessss,” Lestrange said, pointing a finger to emphasise the prolonged s-sounds leaving his mouth.

“Eh,” Regulus said warily, “I think it’s better if I take him-”

The blokes were apparently ready to argue, but Isa cut them off.

“Regulus hasn’t been drinking - we don’t want to get into trouble with Slughorn, now, do we?” she chipped in, meaningfully raising her eyebrows at Dolohov and Lestrange.

“Yes, Nott is perhaps righttttt,” Lestrange said, “you’re *fit* you know that, Nott?”

Isa shuddered in repulsion and clearly decided not to dignify this with an answer. She looked over at Amaryllis and Melania worriedly.

“You take care of them,” Regulus said, “and I’ll take Evan.”

She nodded. Regulus levitated Evan’s body with his wand and quickly the mass parted to let Regulus through. He’d just exited the dungeon when he realised that Barty had followed them tottering behind them for he was clearly plastered.

“No, Barty,” Regulus said strictly, “you can’t come with - you *reek* of alcohol.”

“I don’t - don’t care!” he hiccuped. “What they gonna do? Expel *me*?”

Regulus knew this was true - they’d never expel Barty Crouch Sr.’s son. Still - he could get in a lot of trouble over this, if it ever were to reach Crouch Sr. that his son had been roaming the halls of Hogwarts drunkenly with the corpse of his best friend floating in the air.

Regulus realised he hated the sight of his friend’s body in the air, like he was some kind of animal, and carefully lifted the spell, lowering him to the ground.

“Whatcha doing?” Barty asked.

Regulus didn’t answer, and instead grabbed Evan’s still body and carefully placed him over his shoulders - the bloke was bloody heavy, though, and they had an awfully long way to go to the hospital wing. Although Barty was no help whatsoever, he made for nice company, giving detailed accounts of how fun this evening had been - as if totally unaware of the almost dead body of his best friend tossed over his other best friend’s shoulder. Regulus decided to leave him deluded.

“Can’t believe she snogged me,” Barty said proudly. Regulus found it rather endearing and made a mental note to tease him endlessly once sober when Barty added: “She’s sweet, kind…” Regulus snickered - he’d make sure that Barty’d never hear the end of this, talking about Amaryllis being *sweet* and *kind* .

Regulus was out of breath and sweating when they finally managed to get up to the hospital wing and realised that the sight was horrible - Barty completely plastered, reeking of alcohol and sweat, Regulus out of breath - thankfully not reeking of liquor of any kind, but nonetheless carrying a corpse around.

The severity of the sight was underscored when Regulus burst into the hospital wing and found very worried, stunned faces.

One of them being James bloody Potter’s.

Regulus let out an exasperated sigh. “Again, Potter, why do I *keep* bumping into you?”

Potter didn’t answer, but instead took in the sight of Regulus throwing

the body of Evan on a bed, utterly stunned. At that point, Regulus realised that Potter clearly wasn't alone - but thankfully, it wasn't his brother who was with him this time. It was Lupin, looking rather ill and probably the reason why the two of them were there in the first place.

The infirmary's matron hurriedly bursted into the wing from her office and gasped in shock.

"What happened to you?" she asked, clearly worried. She quickly towered over Evan's body, raising her wand and casting all kinds of diagnostic spells.

Regulus scratched his head awkwardly - he didn't know quite what to tell and what to leave out. He didn't want to rat out his friend, who had clearly drunk *way* too much, but he also knew he had to give Pomfrey enough to properly diagnose his friend in order to heal him.

Luckily, Pomfrey's nose did the job for him.

She turned her head towards Barty, swaying on his feet, and took in a large whiff. "Have you been drinking?" she asked him.

Barty pointed his finger as if about to tell her something very important, then seemingly forgot what he was about to say, and instead opted for slurring: "You are looking *f-fine* tonight, m-madam."

Potter roared with laughter, and Regulus shut him a very stern look, not finding the scene hilarious at all. Lupin just lingered around in the background awkwardly.

"Have they been drinking?" Pomfrey asked, turning towards Regulus.

Regulus sighed in defeat. "Yes. Yes, they have."

"What kind, how much?" she asked, still working her wand over Evan's body but apparently not finding satisfactory information.

"I honestly don't know," Regulus said. "Firewhiskey, mead, dragon blood cocktails - all of it, I think."

Potter scoffed. "Obviously."

Pomfrey looked at them very disapprovingly and motioned them to settle down.

"And how about you, Mr. Black?" she asked, eyeing him curiously.

“Have you been drinking?”

Regulus shook his head honestly. “No, ma’am.”

She nodded, apparently believing him, and returned to Evan with an oddly worried look. Regulus wasn’t particularly a habitué when it came to the infirmary, but he had played Quidditch for quite some years *and* was best friends with Evan and Barty, so he had witnessed and experienced his fair share of injuries, and never - never had he seen Pomfrey so worried and clueless.

“What is the matter, madam?” he asked cautiously. “What is wrong with him? It’s just the alcohol - isn’t it?”

“Tell me exactly what happened, every detail, if you please. I see a slight bump at this side of his head -”

Regulus nodded. “Yes, he fell from his chair. The swelling was enormous - I’ve cooled and numbed it-”

“You know Healing spells?” James asked, impressed. Regulus decided to ignore him - nosy prick. Couldn’t even get to the Hospital Wing without bloody Potter practically ending up in their arses, probably *aching* to spill all the details to Sirius.

“What other magic did you perform on him?” she interrogated, taking off part of Evan’s robes carefully.

“Just a spell to find his heartbeat. It was very faint.”

Pomfrey nodded and continued the endless flicking of her wand and prodding him, when she sighed.

“Is there anything else that he’s been taking?” she asked Regulus.

“Anything else, madam Pomfrey?” Regulus asked, perplexed, as he had no clue what she was on about.

“This level of intoxication,” she clarified, pointing at Evan’s lifeless body, “is almost impossible to reach from alcohol alone - especially from something like Firewhiskey or Mead. So - has he been taking anything else?”

“I haven’t seen other drinks,” Regulus said, but turned his head to Barty anyway. “Barty - have you been drinking anything other than Firewhiskey, Mead or cocktails?”

Barty, returning to reality since he was staring happily at the ceiling, shook his head. “Nope,” he answered, excessively popping the ‘p’. “That’s about it.”

“Anything other than drinks?” Pomfrey continued.

And then it struck Regulus - she wasn’t hinting at liquor, she was hinting at *drugs*.

“No, no!” he said immediately. “Nothing like… *that*.”

“In that case,” Pomfrey said with an exasperated sigh. “I will have to send him to St. Mungo’s.”

“But can’t you fix him anyhow?” Potter chipped in - Regulus again realising that he was apparently still here.

“This can’t be from drinking alone, Mr. Potter,” Pomfrey clarified, “And I do not wish to proceed without knowing exactly what has put him into this state. I cannot risk it.”

Regulus sighed in worry. He was sure that Evan would be alright - as long as he had a heart beat and no strange, dark wounds, the Healers at St. Mungo’s would patch him up in an instant. But the wrath of his father - that was something he really did *not* wish upon his friend.

“I’ll get the paperwork ready and inform them immediately,” Pomfrey said, hurriedly making his way to her office.

“Some party you guys must’ve had,” Potter said warily once the matron was out of sight.

“Like you Gryffindors don’t know how to party,” Regulus shot him.

He seemed to consider this and nodded. “Sure, but we never end up nearly dead in the hospital wing.”

Regulus rolled his eyes in irritation - bloody Gryffindors and their pride - and looked around. Barty, in the meanwhile, had clearly fallen asleep and was snoring loudly. Regulus quickly moved a bed closer with his wand and levitated Barty’s body onto it. Fuck, was he tired, too - it had been a busy day, and the night was starting to get *very* long. He sighed.

“Long day?” Potter voiced Regulus’s thoughts. Regulus scoffed and again didn’t answer, making his way to Evan instead. He readjusted

his robes and carefully placed Evan's arms into a comfortable position next to his torso.

"That's some crowd you're hanging with," Potter continued. Regulus realised he wasn't hinting at Evan and Barty, but at the company he'd found himself in earlier that day, although it felt like a week ago.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Regulus shot.

"Aren't you a bit … young to hang out with them?"

Regulus scoffed and looked Potter in the eyes, ignoring the fact that his brother's best friend was putting his finger on a very sore spot. "Age is merely a number, Potter."

Potter nodded. "I guess it is."

Regulus was about to retort something, when he fell something in Evan's pocket - something small. He extracted it and realised it was the cap of a vial. Now, Regulus didn't go around rummaging through his friends' pockets often, so he, in essence, had no idea what was weird or normal for his friend to carry around, but it was weird that it was the *only* thing he had pocketed - and, besides, it looked familiar… Regulus had seen it somewhere, before…

He looked around questionably, finding Potter's spectacled gaze, and his brown eyes that he'd seen subconsciously before while looking at that vial's cap…

Fuck, Regulus thought, snapping his head back to the sight of Evan, *you blithering fool!*

"Madame Pomfrey!" Regulus shouted immediately, the urgency dripping from his voice. "Madame Pomfrey, I think I know what happened!"

She rushed over immediately and looked at the cap with a stunned expression on her face.

Regulus did a very hard and lousy job at blocking Potter's presence out. "I think Evan's been drinking Dreamless Sleep Potion."

The matron looked at him in surprise.

"I don't remember distributing such a potion-"

"You wouldn't," Regulus said, shifting uncomfortably on his feet, "it

was brewed-" he didn't want to rat out Isa for brewing potions and administering it to her friends, "-ourselves."

"Why would he take such a potion with alcohol?" Pomfrey asked, the exasperation and worry clear in her voice. "It is no secret they can't be combined-"

"I think he didn't know it was a Dreamless Sleep Potion, ma'am," Regulus clarified.

"He'd surely recognise the potion meant for-"

Regulus sighed and almost whispered, "The potion wasn't intended for him, ma'am."

"He woul- *oh*," she said, after it apparently clicked, looking at the guilt ridden face of Regulus. " *Aha* , that… that makes sense, Mr. Black, yes." She nodded, sensitive to Regulus's guilt and taking in the sight of him still having his eyes closed as if to protect himself from the reality he found himself in. "Don't worry, Mr. Black, now that we know what put him in this state, it will be rather easy to get him out. Some potions and a good night's sleep will work miracles." She smiled. "Well, I'll get to it then. You stay as long as you'd like, Mr. Black."

Regulus sighed, lowered into a seat and dropped his face into his hands. This was such a bloody disaster, all of it - the bloody fool *had* to take a potion he had no clue was what for, he'd been almost sent off to St. Mungo's because of it, making the ordeal public to his entire family, and Regulus was just so bloody tired. So tired of it all.

And to top it off - James bloody Potter, whose path seemed to cross his all the blithering time, was there to witness it all, the exasperation, the potion, the people he hang out with, invading his privacy like a prying nebby that felt entitled to know everything about everyone, everywhere. Regulus very deliberately did not look Potter's way and instead decided to finally close the curtains - something he should've done way earlier. He pushed Barty's bed over, drawing the curtain around him as well, and decided to leave this place.

"Madam Pomfrey?" he asked, hoovering at her office's door.

"Yes, Mr. Black?"

"They will be alright?"

"Yes, I promise."

“Okay, then … I’ll be off to the dormitory…”

“Of course, Mr. Black, I will take good care of them.” She took in his guilty face once more. “You did an impressive job, Mr. Black, thinking and acting so swiftly. There’s not many fourth-years, or seventh-years for that matter, that know a range of Healing spells and manage to cast them under great pressure.” Regulus nodded, although he didn’t feel like he earned this praise in the slightest. “And as for the potions-” her voice was a whisper now “-I advise to *never* brew and administer them without supervision from a teacher, or me. There’s a vast array of potions available at the infirmary, Mr. Black.”

Regulus nodded again, not meeting her gaze. “Thank you, Madam Pomfrey.”

And then he hurried out of the hospital wing, praying that perhaps tonight the fact that he was completely knackered by all of it, would at least lend him a good night's sleep.

Chapter 10: Of Love & Bludgers

The time between Evan's near death experience and the year's first Quidditch match passed swiftly, mostly due to their swamped schedules. Vanity had them training five times a week, leaving only one evening free as Regulus had to spend the other one with his fellow 'champions' in their ASS-meetings. They had been forced to complete a similar track another two times and Regulus hadn't believed his luck when he'd been teamed up with Khan and Thompson and had somehow managed to escape a bonding exercise with Selwyn and Coolidge. McGonagall had been impressed by their progress and had therefore agreed on having their ASS-meetings return to normal so they could actually work something out so close to the assignment - they only had about four weeks and thus four meetings left.

The exercises with Khan and Thompson had been alright - a bit more formal and distant, and therefore less annoying, but he'd learnt quite some things about his teammates. He truly doubted whether his knowledge about Khan's childhood in war-ridden Kashmir or Thompson's weird love for owls would help them during their assignments, however, but alas. Of his friends, Isa was the only one that came close to understanding the swiftness of time and the necessity of making every minute of a day worthwhile - she might not been forced to play Quidditch hours on end in the freezing cold almost every day, but she did hold the record for taking most classes and had an infinite flow of essay inches to write, on top of the weekly meeting with her ASS-group she was forced into as well.

However, another part of the sensation that time flew by, might have been due to the Dreamless Sleep Potions that he had been taking. Luckily, Evan hadn't drunk or smashed all the bottles, leaving Regulus with a batch that'd last him until Christmas at least. He took them twice a week - choosing the nights that he expected to be tormented the most or the ones that preceded potentially difficult days. He was very tempted to break his promise to Isa and take them more often, because the potion's effects were indescribable; he'd sleep for hours on end, like a log, and Evan and Barty had to almost beat him up like a pair of violent Muggles to get him up in the morning. Not having had a normal night's sleep in months, Regulus looked forward to these nights and scheduled everything so that he would be in bed before nine - assuring he would be able to enjoy every precious minute of the potion's effects. Still, the downside of it was that, even by taking it only twice a week, his sense of time felt off - some things seemed to

take unbearably long, whereas in other cases, an hour seemed to pass with the blink of an eye. He knew this could happen, but it annoyed him nonetheless.

He was debating on when to take the next potion - either that night, because he was knackered and felt he could really use some recharging, or the next night, because it was the night before the match against Gryffindor he had to be well-rested for. Currently he couldn't give a fig about it all because he was lying flat on one of the sofas in the common room, his head on Isa's lap, enjoying her fingers' phenomenal stroking and scratching of his hair. The other hand was sadly occupied with holding up a book for her Charms essays from which she was reading.

"Ah, there's the love-birds again," Barty teased once he settled down in a chair across from them.

"You're one to talk, with all of *that* going on," Isa said, shooting a rather sharp look at the chair a tad too close for their liking. The chair was currently occupied by Evan and Melania whose bodies were interlocked, snogging and annoyingly giggling and all of that. It was a miracle that Barty wasn't in the chair next to them doing the same with Amaryllis, for that was practically how Regulus's friends spent their free time these days.

"Oh, you're wrong there, Ies," Regulus chipped in, his eyes closed but nonetheless aware of the scenes Isa was referring to, "*that* has nothing to do with love."

Isa laughed and Barty sighed in annoyance. "We can't all be soppy fools like you, Black. Oh - there she is, gotta go!"

Soppy fools– Regulus knew his friend was just joking, but the words echoed in his head nonetheless. He realised he couldn't really argue that Barty wasn't right, though - perhaps he *was* a soppy fool. He had never fancied someone, but he was certain that once he did, he'd do it all; romantic dinners and dancing, the presents, love letters, getting on a knee asking to marry her…

"It's alright, you know." The words of Isa forced Regulus back to the common room.

"What?" he asked, his eyes still closed.

"It's alright to–" she sighed, "–you know, want more than *that*."

Regulus opened his eyes and was welcomed by the sight of Barty unifying his face with Amaryllis in a very tasteless way. Regulus groaned.

“How about you though?” he asked, looking at her, still from her lap. “Don’t care for an extensive snogging session in the common room?”

Isa snorted. “No, thanks, not like that.”

Regulus considered this for a while. “Ah yes, you’re the type that wants to be swept off her feet.” He looked at Isa’s face sternly in the distance, not meeting Regulus’s gaze. “You’d want the candle lit dinners, rose petals, the wooing and courting–” He saw a blush creeping upon her face and bursted out in laughter, lifting his head from her lap. “*Ha* - you are a *soppy romantic*, Nott!” he roared victoriously. “Who would’ve thought?”

It shouldn’t surprise him, though, and it didn’t - Isa was practically the living personification of self-respect and dignity. Of course she wanted all of that.

Isa shot him a glare accompanied by an eyeroll which effect was rather dampened by the scarlet cheeks. “Well yes, I don’t want it to be like … with them.”

Regulus took her words in and knew she wasn’t talking about their friends, but instead about their parents. Their parents who formed all perfect and exemplary couples to the outside world but, behind closed doors, were confronted with adultery, oppression and abuse. He knew no details - like it was supposed to be - but he knew that a great part of Mother’s bitterness had to do with Father’s fondness of blonde and unattached women. He knew more about the adultery committed by Isa’s father on his work trips around the world, as Isa had often been her mother’s refuge, and he knew that it bothered her deeply that her mother just accepted it as a part of being wealthy and a woman - because, let’s face it, the adultery, oppression and abuse was almost exclusively suffered by them - women. The only married couple that actually set a good example - and that Regulus knew well enough to make an assessment about - were Evan’s parents. They were so obviously smitten with each other that Sirius had always believed the conspiracy that the two of them secretly lived off Amortentia. Evan was always rather embarrassed about their public display of affection and mutual praise, but Regulus believed that they might have been the only couple that truly understood the workings of marriage. Somehow most people didn’t seem to grasp the responsibilities that

came with being the head of the family, and the sacredness of monogamy. How special it must be to belong to one person only, sharing your thoughts, feelings and body only with that other person - and giving it up all for a stupid fling, for feeling powerful and wanted by some desperate blonde.

No, Isa was darn right about expecting more, being entitled to more than that.

“You’re right,” Regulus said after a long silence. “You shouldn’t settle for less.”

Regulus sensed that Isa wanted to retort something, but she was cut off by the arrival of Severus, who looked rather bemused by the scene.

“Evening,” he said. “I believe this is your owl, Black?”

Regulus sat up and saw his owl flying over - he had a subscription to the Evening Prophet, but unlike the morning owl delivery, the Evening Prophet was always delivered at the Owlery and to be collected afterwards. Since the Evening Prophet was only published in special circumstances, Regulus would never know when there was an edition to collect or not, and his owl would take the paper and fly to the dungeons. Astonishing creatures they were, owls.

“Gaius,” Regulus stroked the owl.

“You’ve named your owl *Gaius*?” Severus asked, eyebrows arched questionably.

“Oh no,” Isa smirked mockingly, “that’d be Gaius Julius Caesar, actually.”

Regulus, being mocked for the name of his owl for many years, shot her a sarcastic glare pretending to find Isa’s comment hilarious, and took the Evening edition before sending Gaius off.

“You’ve named your owl after a Roman emperor?” Severus continued, sitting down on the chair across from them.

This surprised Regulus – not many people seemed to be able to make that link. Only the well-read people that took a particular interest in the Roman Empire worked it out, and until so far, that had only been Uncle Alphard and Magnus Nott, Isa’s father.

“You know a lot about the Roman Empire?” Regulus asked.

Severus shook his head. “No, but I’ve been raised in the Muggle world. Caesar is widely known. The question is – why do *you* know about him?”

Regulus shrugged. “I’ve read some of his work.” This earned him a very confused look by Severus. “We were taught Latin. His bibliography was part of the teaching material.”

Not feeling like stirring up all kinds of memories of his homeschooling experiences, Regulus ceremonially unfolded the paper and was immediately immersed by the front-page article.

———————

Daily Prophet Evening Edition

MINISTER MINCHUM UNVEILS TOUGH NEW MEASURES TO FIGHT TERROR ATTACKS

By Althea Harkwood, Senior Correspondent

In response to the surge of terror sweeping the wizarding world, Minister for Magic Harold Minchum earlier tonight announced a series of bold new measures aimed at strengthening security and delivering swift justice. Under increasing pressure to curb the rise of dark wizard attacks, Minchum has called for an expanded Dementor presence at Azkaban and introduced a draft law that would extend sentences for terror-related crimes and expedite trials.

The Dementors, feared for their soul-draining abilities, will nearly double in number at Azkaban, reinforcing the prison’s defences against dangerous prisoners. Despite concerns over the creatures’ cruel effects, Minchum defended the move, stating, "We are at war with forces that aim to destroy us. Azkaban must remain a place of dread for those who threaten our way of life."

Draft Law: Longer Sentences, Faster Trials

In tandem with the increased security at Azkaban, Minchum proposed the Azkaban Security and Sentencing Enhancement Act, which would lengthen prison terms for those convicted of terror-related crimes. The law also seeks to fast-track the trial process for accused dark wizards, ensuring that justice is delivered swiftly.

“Delays in the judicial system only give our enemies more time to spread terror,” Minchum said. “We need fast, decisive action to protect our citizens.”

The legislation would allow trials for high-profile cases to be expedited, with sentences being handed down within days. However, this proposal has faced criticism from civil rights advocates who warn of the dangers of bypassing traditional Wizengamot procedures, risking wrongful convictions.

Barty Crouch Sr. on the Frontlines

Barty Crouch Sr., the expected new Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has thrown his full support behind Minchum’s measures. Known for his hardline stance on dark magic, Crouch called the proposals essential for the times.

“This is no time for hesitation,” Crouch said. “Those who deal in dark magic have no respect for life or law. The Ministry must respond with absolute resolve. Life in Azkaban should be the standard sentence for those involved in terror.”

Crouch, widely recognized for his tough approach to law enforcement, emphasised that swift justice does not mean sacrificing fairness, but rather ensuring that criminals face consequences immediately.

Escalating Fears, Divided Opinions

These new measures come as fear continues to grip the wizarding community. With dark magic attacks reported in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and beyond, the need for stronger security has become clear. However, not everyone is convinced that Minchum’s approach is the right one. Critics warn that the use of more Dementors and rushed trials could lead to an erosion of civil liberties, sparking fears of injustice in the name of security.

The Azkaban Security and Sentencing Enhancement Act will be voted on by the Wizengamot in the coming weeks, and its outcome could shape the future of magical law enforcement. While the Ministry remains confident that these measures will curb the rising terror, many within the wizarding world are left wondering what price they will pay for safety.

For now, all witches and wizards are urged to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity as the Ministry intensifies its efforts to combat the growing threat of darkness.

Isa had read along over his shoulder, so he quickly tossed the paper to a very curious-looking Severus. “Here, read this.”

They sat in silence while Severus read through the article, and Regulus’s mind was working overtime. It was well-known that Minchum would tighten the rope, but Regulus had hoped it would take longer. This was probably only the first step of a very long walk, and they needed time to strengthen, to recruit…

“Barty’s gonna love this,” Isa said darkly, glancing over at their friend that had just bursted out in laughter over a joke by Evan.

Regulus nodded, happy that their roommates Crabbe and Selwyn weren’t very politically engaged, for they’d make life in their dorm a living hell for him. Unfortunately there were still people like Dolohov and Lestrange that were very well-informed and liked to get a rise out of Barty. Regulus sighed.

“Let’s not mention it until it’s necessary,” he offered.

“You think the law is going to pass?” Severus asked.

“Definitely – and I think, if – no, *once* Barty’s dad really becomes the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, this law will seem like a joke. He’s going to push for much, much worse stuff…”

*****

The day of the Quidditch match against Gryffindor, Regulus woke very early. He had chosen not to take the Dreamless Potion the night prior, afraid that something would go wrong and he would be unable to wake up in the morning. They didn’t have a very competent reserve Seeker and Cissy had informed him just the night prior that she’d be attending the match as well – he could not risk oversleeping or overdosing, so he had defied the nightmares and woke up before everyone else feeling anything but rested, but feeling the slow build-up of adrenaline in his body.

He hated the breakfast before matches, so he always opted for some breakfast in the Kitchens and then made his way to the Hogwarts grounds before the majority of the Castle had even awakened. He knew that Vanity preferred them to have breakfast together, going over tactics one more time and lending the possibility to take last-minute changes into account, but Regulus had always gotten a carte

blanche to get lost in his nerves on his own. Because that's what he was – unbelievingly, gut-clenching nervous. He'd walk in endless circles, going over scenarios in his head and flipping through all the major happenings in their last practices. It was a never-ending series of what-ifs and if-thens that would only stop at the sound of the referee's whistle and the Quaffle thrown in the air. Then there was nothing but concentration and the longing for catching that little, golden ball flying somewhere around the pitch.

The position of Seeker seemed to be invented solely for Regulus; he was a great flyer, having had years of, albeit childish, experience under the belt before he'd set a foot on the Hogwarts pitch, but he wasn't really one to play in a team. The job of the Seeker had very little to do with anything happening on the pitch – sure, sometimes he had to wait to catch the Snitch until they had scored a certain amount of goals, but it was mostly a solitary endeavour. Perhaps that's why Vanity was alright with him structurally missing out on the pre-match breakfasts; he had only one job, and that was to catch the golden Snitch.

The strategy for this match was rather straightforward. The Slytherins had a very solid team, but they had a potential weakness in form of their Chasers' collaboration; on the good days, Silvermire, Vanity and Coldgrave were a well-oiled machine, but on the bad days… Still, it was a good thing that the Gryffindor's weakness came mostly in the form of their keeper. Regulus had found it very funny the bloke was called Christopher Steele but was the team's weakest player - though this hadn't yielded the right reaction by anyone but Isa, who'd at least had let out a roar of laughter. Still, it was Regulus's job to find the snitch as soon as possible, and that was all that was to it.

So, once the Quaffle was thrown into the air – and Potter had seized it in an instant, of course, bloody swank – Regulus started his quest. He vaguely registered the commentary echoing over the pitch while flying his way around, dodging fellow players and the Bludgers and steering away from the Quaffle and all the commotion the ball always managed to attract.

"And again, Potter in possession – off like a shot, weaving past the Slytherin defence with ease! He lines up the shot… and it is THROUGH the hoop! 30-0 to Gryffindor!"

Regulus grumpily glared at the sight of Potter's victory loop and refocused on the game – Gryffindor's Seeker, Daniel Woodcroft, was practically doing the same as Regulus and was just flying and looking

around. Woodcroft was a third-year and new on the team, so Regulus *really* couldn't afford spotting the snitch too late. Regulus sighed and flew on, glancing quickly at the stands and spotting his friends in the Slytherin crowd. Evan and Barty were completely immersed by the Chasers, but Isa caught his gaze and shot a broad smile. A few rows up, he saw his favourite cousin. She was focused on the game and didn't see him. She was, surprisingly so, accompanied by Lucius and Corban Yaxley. Before Regulus could give it any thought, however, he heard the whooshing sound of a Bludger and was almost knocked off his broom.

"MOLLET, DORNE!" Vanity roared. "Eyes on the BLUDGER, not on MACMILLAN if you please!"

"Sorry, mate!" Mollet grinned, flying past quickly with an apologising look on his face.

"Won't happen again, Cap!" Dorne screamed, winking at Regulus.

Regulus recomposed himself and continued the quest for the Snitch. Just when he was about to throw in some fake snitch sightings in the form of sudden accelerations just to pester Woodcroft, he saw Potter speeding by, snatching the Quaffle out of the air in what must've been an impossible angle. The bloke continued his way to the loops, dodging a Bludger with immense precision and speed, then threw the Quaffle to Macmillan, dodging another Bludger, flew around Vanity, caught the Quaffle with impossible reflexes and then gave it a swing and – *scored* . He bloody scored.

Regulus was stunned. He knew that the Gryffindor's Chasers would outshine theirs, but this - this was excellence on a whole other level. Potter was a bloody natural on a broomstick, a genius. It was almost enchanting how he rushed through the air, one with his broom, the Quaffle a mere extension of his arm, his throw seemingly careless but with insane precision. The bloke was brilliant.

"Amazing, huh?" The voice of his brother snapped him back to reality. "Your lousy group of Chasers has nothing on him. Still – want a tissue for your drooling, Reg?"

Regulus shot him a fierce glare and wanted to retort something witty, but the fact was - Sirius was right. The Slytherin chasers were clearly struggling to find a rhythm and had scored only once so far. Regulus would have to find the snitch soon, before stupid Potter made Gryffindor lead with 150 points or more.

Potter and the Macmillan sisters did another three of their magic tricks, resulting in the score of 90-10, when Vanity, Silvermire, and Coldgrave seemed to have finally found their footing. Silvermire passed to Vanity, who deftly avoided a collision with Blaiss, then passed to Coldgrave, who tossed it back to Silvermire sharply.

“And there she goes – and the shot GOES through! That makes 90-20 to Gryffindor!”

Regulus roared with the rest of the Slytherins and then decided to fly another round across the pitch in the hope to find the little golden ball that’d put an end to the match. Clearly, the Slytherin Chasers were finally playing in sync.

“Silvermire with the Quaffle now… passes to Vanity… back to Coldgras. They’re closing in on Steele, who’s looking increasingly pressured, and – then, HE LETS IT THROUGH!”

“*Yes*,” Regulus roared victoriously and then continued his quest.

Unfortunately, the Quaffle was back in Potter’s possession, meaning Gryffindor scored within less than a minute, and Regulus felt the pressure to find the snitch rising. He *had* to catch it – better sooner than later, since Gryffindor only needed to get his hands on the Quaffle a couple of times more and catching the snitch would not lead them into victory…

And then he saw it. A flicker. Barely more than a shimmer in the weak November sunlight.

The snitch.

It was hovering just above Potter’s head, wings flickering delicately, unnoticed by anyone else. Regulus felt his heart seize in his chest. For a second, he couldn't breathe – this was it. If he’d caught it now, it would be still on time. They’d win the match… But he couldn’t just dive at it – too obvious. Potter would scare the snitch off or it would draw Woodcroft’s attention. No, he had to be very careful, casual…

Regulus forced himself to breathe, to act casual, even though the adrenaline coursing through him screamed otherwise. He glided gently to the left, pretending to survey the opposite end of the pitch, his fingers tightening around his broom handle. His pulse was deafening in his ears. He counted every second, hoping the Snitch wouldn’t dart away before he could make his move.

When he turned back, the Snitch was still there, flitting lazily a few feet from where Potter soared, who had his eyes locked on the Quaffle.

It was now or never.

With a sudden burst of speed, Regulus leaned low over his broomstick and shot forward, keeping his body tucked close to the broom to avoid drawing attention. The crowd hadn't noticed – neither had Potter. The wind roared in his ears as he pushed his broom to its limit, inching closer, the Snitch shimmering brighter now, so close he could almost feel its wings beat against the air.

But then—a shout rang from across the pitch. Baiss had seen him. He swung his arm and a Bludger shot towards him like a cannonball. Just before he could process it and realise that it was too late to dodge it anyway, he felt it unite with his stomach – the sensation of a violent, breath-taking smack to the gut.

Regulus gasped, pain exploding through his torso and his vision blurred. He felt his broom wobbling beneath him, and he nearly lost control as the force of the Bludger reverberated through his bones.

But the Snitch – it was still there… He was so close…

With every muscle in his body screaming in protest, and his lungs begging for air that'd been punched out by the Bludger, he reached out. His fingers brushed the air just inches from the golden wings. All gasps and shrieks in the stands and from his fellow players were drowned by the sound of his own accelerated breathing that cast a sensation of fire in his chest with every breath he took. He'd just have this one chance – everyone was watching him, all the students, the entire staff, Cissy and Lucius… there was no room for failure. He was working with his last strength, if he didn't catch it now, the rest of the match would be played without him… he couldn't afford to lose this match, *fuck!*

He stretched further, ignoring the sickening ache, ignoring the blood pounding in his ears.

And then—

His fingers closed around something small, fast, and thrumming with life.

Regulus pulled his hand back, clutching the Snitch tightly as he

collapsed forward on his broom, the cold metal pressing into his palm. He heard it – the shrill blast of the whistle. He'd done it – the match was over. He'd caught the Snitch. Despite all the miracles Potter had been working on his broom, Regulus had led his team into victory… Slytherin had *won* !

He hovered for a moment longer, still gasping for breath and the Snitch struggling in his grasp. He heard the Slytherin stands erupt in cheers, he saw the proud face of Cissy somewhere far away, a little victory dance by Isa, and then the disgruntled face of Potter that had just lost the match – but disgruntled became … worried very fast, for some reason. And then Regulus's vision became blurry, explaining Potter's worried face, but before he could process any of that, he lost grip of his broom as he drifted off in unconsciousness, and although he was quickly falling to the ground it felt like he was flying, flying, flying … and then there was no more.

*****

"–the best catch until this very day–"

"Yes, *brilliant*–"

"How this sport is still legal–"

Regulus smiled faintly at the sound of his best friends' voices. He slowly turned his head towards the sounds, trying to let his body follow. He regretted it immediately when a darting pain shot through his stomach, and groaned.

"Ah, finally rounded up his beauty sleep," he heard Barty say.

"Keep your voice down, Crouch," Isa hissed. "I'm sure his head is killing him." He felt Isa's softly stroking his cheek.

"Not my h-head," Regulus croaked, eyes still closed. "My gut."

"Big shock," Evan said, "it's a miracle that Bludger hasn't knocked your intestines right out of you."

Regulus slowly opened his eyes and took some time to get adjusted to the beams of November sun filling the hospital wing.

"How long was I out?" he asked, voice still hoarse. He coughed. He felt the pain in his stomach ebbing away to a manageable level, but realised his body felt heavy, like a magnet pulled to the bed's

mattress. He slowly sat up, Isa speeding over to prop some pillows behind his back in support.

“Not that long,” Barty answered, “three hours tops. Brilliant catch – fucking brilliant. You should’ve seen the Gryffindors’ faces.”

“Yes, you’ll be the guest of honour tonight,” Evan said cheerfully.

“Tonight?” Regulus asked in suspicion.

“Yes – at the party.”

Isa and Regulus both groaned.

“He can’t attend a party,” Isa shot immediately. “He’s lucky to even get out of this bed.”

Regulus, noticing Barty and Evan smirking meaningfully at Isa’s concern, really didn’t want to come across like a wimp, so he sat up and stretched his arms, ignoring the pain that sped through his body in response.

“I can attend a party,” he said sternly. “What time?”

Evan and Barty sniggered victoriously. “That’s the spirit, mate.”

The sound of an opening door attracted Regulus’s gaze to Pomfrey’s office. The matron hurriedly made her way towards him and immediately started fussing over him, assessing his stomach, firing question after question at him about his pain level and in which places and so on.

“Alright then, Mr. Black,” she concluded, “you may leave after you’ve finished this.” And with the flick of the wand, she conjured up a tray with a glass of pumpkin juice and two chicken sandwiches.

Regulus let his gaze trail over the wing and noticed that there was just one other bed occupied – he couldn’t see who or for what reason, as the curtain was drawn and the student seemed to be fast asleep by the absence of any sound or movement. Regulus, eager to exchange the hospital wing’s bed for his own, ate his way through his sandwiches while enjoying a step-by-step reenactment of the match by Barty and Evan. Regulus barked in laughter at Evan’s mimicry of his crash to the ground and realised that Isa was rather silent.

“Oh, yes, *hilarious*,” she shot them sarcastically, visibly unamused by it

all. “Reg dropping dead from Merlin knows how high just for a stupid game–” all boys raised their voices in opposition, which she ignored “–and *besides*, if you were to truthfully re-enact his crash, who’s gonna play Potter?”

Regulus choked in his sandwich and felt the tears prickling in his eyes. “Potter? What’s Potter got to do with this?” He felt a pit growing in his stomach.

Barty and Evan stopped in their tracks and glanced between Regulus and Isa awkwardly.

“What happened?” Regulus demanded.

“Nothing much, really,” Barty answered. The topic of James Potter or anyone connected to Sirius always went hand in hand with a certain amount of tentativeness and caution. “Just, you know, the stupid Gryffindor trying to play the hero, going after you…”

Regulus groaned and his eyes widened in horror. “Don’t tell me – *please* don’t tell me bloody Potter saved my guts out there?”

“No, no,” Evan said hurriedly, “Hooch had you covered – slowed you down, had a stretcher ready and all–”

“But *he* didn’t know that, did he?” Isa shot in defence. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone dive that fast.”

“Yes, well, thrilling as it may be,” Barty said sarcastically, “it was Hooch that caught you in the end, so no need to feel like you owe anyone anything – especially *him* .”

Regulus nodded, but felt the pit in his stomach as a rock weighing heavily on him. Before he could shrug it off, though, the door to the hospital wing opened, marking the entrance of Cissy, Lucius and Corban Yaxley.

In light of the maximum number of visitors being exceeded, and perhaps also due to the slight level of intimidation that came with people like Lucius and Yaxley, Regulus’s three friends got ready to leave the infirmary.

“See you in a bit, mate,” Evan said cheerfully.

“Don’t rush things,” Isa warned him. She looked concerned. “It’ll be crowded and boisterous in the common room so take your time to …

you know, get up and running. Or stay here for the night–"

Regulus rolled his eyes, but accompanied it with a small smile. "I'll be okay, Ies. See you in a bit."

She sighed in defeat and made her way out of the infirmary, waving at Cissy in goodbye.

"Reg!" Cissy said, fussing over him immediately like the matron had done, "how are you? Are you alright? That Bludger was–"

Very aware of the tall postures of the visitors around his bed and feeling rather small and pathetic in this seemingly bedridden situation, Regulus sat up straight and cut her short.

"I'm *fine*, Cissy, it's a risk that comes with the game, who hasn't been hit by a Bludger once or twice–"

"See?" Lucius chipped in. "Fit as a fiddle."

"Well, you'd better get some proper rest," Cissy said reluctantly.

"I will," he said quickly.

"No celebrations in the common room tonight?" Yaxley asked with a smirk.

"Oh, there will be," Regulus answered. "Will you be joining?"

"Oh no," Cissy said with a smile, "we just came to see you in action, Reg – Lucius and Corban had a day off and decided to come along."

It crossed Regulus's mind that there were probably tons of other things that the two could do on a free Saturday.

"Yes," Lucius nodded, "it has been ages since we've watched a match at Hogwarts…"

"Yes, and you were brilliant, Reg," Cissy praised. "Really brilliant!"

Regulus shot her a small smile, having an inkling that there was more that they'd like to discuss. He noticed Cissy casting a secretive glance over the hospital wing.

"Now, about Christmas…"

Ah, there it was.

“Of course we’ll host the annual Christmas Ball at Dreadmoor Keep. All the people of importance will be present.” Regulus nodded, familiar with the celebration. “Now, as for some days later, we’d like to invite you to a more … exclusive gathering.”

This raised Regulus’s attention. He sat up straight and tilted his head slightly, urging his cousin to continue.

“It’ll be a small group, all like-minded people, willing to swear allegiance to the cause–”

“Now, let’s be prudent and keep it at this,” Lucius said sharply. Regulus noticed a small blush creeping upon Cissy’s face by the reprimanding from her fiancé. “It’ll be a follow up of our last meeting, but with a slightly bigger group.”

Regulus nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Splendid,” Yaxley said.

“Well, we’ll be off,” Cissy said once she had fully composed herself. She gave Regulus a peck on the cheek. “We’ll see each other soon over the holidays and – goodluck with that assignment.”

“Regulus,” Lucius nodded, shaking his hand in goodbye. Yaxley followed his example and Regulus sighed in relief at the infirmary’s silence once the trio had left through the door.

A silence that was short-lived, though.

“Again, *interesting* choice of friends, Black.”

Regulus groaned as the curtains of the solely occupied bed were opened.

“What is it with you?” Regulus asked in irritation. Seriously, he just couldn’t get rid of him. “Are you following me around, for fuck’s sake?”

Potter grinned. “Now, now, contrary to what you might believe, not the *entire* world revolves around you, you know. I’m here to visit a friend.” He nodded at the bed still hidden by the partially opened curtains.

“Who’s there?”

“None of your business.”

“Ah – but it is your business who I hang out with?”

Potter seemed to consider this for a while and then shrugged. “No, it isn’t. But tell me – what is this secretive meeting over the holidays about?”

Regulus groaned. “Again, none of your business, Potter. Hasn’t your Mum taught you it’s rude to eavesdrop?”

“Oh, she has, but you weren’t really keeping it private, were you? What are these meetings about? You’ve attended them before?”

“Stop, Potter,” Regulus warned him. “Don’t go poking your nose in things way above your head.”

Although he tried very hard not to let it show, Regulus was concerned by this development. This piece of information clearly wasn’t meant for Potter of all bloody people to hear, and if Potter knew, his brother would… Regulus was certain that Potter didn’t understand the things he was meddling in. Sure, Sirius had probably shared some of it, but there were things that one couldn’t properly grasp without being raised by and in it. But Sirius – Sirius was the heir. Sirius understood all of it, he was formed by it, it was in his genes, in his bones, in his past, present, future. He’d know exactly what a secretive meeting with people like Lucius and Corban entailed.

Potter looked at him in contemplation. “Alright,” he said, surprising Regulus. “So, how’s the stomach?”

Regulus shot him an irritated glare. “Fine.”

Potter nodded. “It was quite the smack – and crash, for that matter.”

“Yes,” Regulus answered stiffly. “I’ve been told you came to my rescue.”

Potter smirked. “Hooch had you.”

“So I’ve been told as well.”

They both stood in silence, Regulus taking in the spectacled face of Potter, laced by an expression he couldn’t read.

“Well, until the next one…”

Chapter 11: Of Riddles & Boggarts

If Potter had drawn any conclusions about the conversation he had overheard, he didn't let it show. The last weeks before Christmas break passed quite normally - just the continuance of classes, quidditch practices and the stupid ASS-meetings. Also politically, the only noteworthy thing that happened was the promotion of Barty's father to Head of the Department Magical Law Enforcement.

The news had been announced in the Daily Prophet two days prior to the first ASS-assignment. It had been a rather strange day with Barty who pretended nothing had really happened - but he was very jittery, keen to jump on any opportunity to jinx the person that in some way or another made a reference to his father's promotion. Regulus suspected that a great part of his friend's silent anger had to do with the fact he'd read the news in the Prophet and not, for example, in a personal letter - but Barty Crouch Sr. was clearly too busy elsewhere to preoccupy himself with trivial notions such as the life or wellbeing of his own son.

Regulus, no stranger to the notion of a distant and superficial relation with a father - although his did have the right ideology - didn't really know what to do with his friend, more so because he was rarely free of the claws and tongue of Amaryllis. Besides, Regulus himself was very busy, trying to survive the juggling of all his commitments and living off two days of decent sleep a week - being tormented still the other five.

So, the Monday before Christmas break, he was glad when breakfast was finished and only the ASS-'champions' stayed behind in the Great Hall, awaiting Dumbledore's instructions. A failure or not, after today, he'd be free of the ASS-stress for some time and, in light of the holidays, many teachers refrained from saddling the students with too much homework, meaning that Regulus would have a relatively calm last few days at Hogwarts.

"Good morning, champions," Dumbledore said way too cheerfully. He spread his arms in a welcoming gesture and beamed over the students. "I am sure you have all been looking forward to this day - and here we are, at last."

Regulus snorted - *looking forward*.

The housetables had been removed, leaving the students to linger

awkwardly around the staff table that was still intact.

Regulus looked around, wondering how they were going to transform the Great Hall into multiple relay tracks, when Dumbledore answered said question.

“Depending on your group, you will either complete the relay on the Quidditch pitch, on the grounds near the Green Houses or here, in the Great Hall. You are to fulfil the assignment either this morning, or after lunch, in the afternoon.”

Ah, well, that meant they’d be done with the track in a couple of hours tops, guaranteeing that the Great Hall could be used for lunch. Or… would they let them continue during lunch with all the other students present if they didn’t finish it on time? Regulus shuddered at the thought. He had shared only the crucial things with his friends and the idea that his friends witnessed him in action with some Hufflepuffs and Potter was truly horrifying.

“I’m sure they’ll assign us to the pitch, right?” Potter asked. Regulus, who hadn’t noticed his presence, jumped in surprise. “Symbolism and all that.”

“Nah, I’m sure we’re assigned to the Green Houses in blithering December,” Regulus groaned.

“The grounds will probably be heated,” Isa said with a face suggesting that was completely obvious.

In the end, Regulus’s group wasn’t assigned to the Pitch in the spirit of symbolism, but instead to the Great Hall - and they were scheduled in the morning, meaning that the horrifying thought of concluding some assignment in front of the rest of the school was becoming more feasible. They had Selwyn on their team, after all…

“Well, good luck,” Isa shot Regulus grumpily, looking warily at his group before she made her way to the pitch - her group was also scheduled in the morning. Regulus shot her a smile.

“Your girlfriend is clearly in high spirits,” Potter mused.

“Not my girlfriend, Potter.”

“*Really*?” He looked surprised.

“If you could wait outside for a moment, while we preoccupy

ourselves with the preparation…," McGonagall said, directing Regulus's group to the Entrance Hall. She, Flick and Slughorn were the only teachers left in the Great Hall.

When they re-entered the Hall after a while, it was hard to recognise the big space in which they consumed their meals thrice a day. There were no tables, no benches - no, it was completely empty, except for one square room in the middle of the space like a cube, all its walls visible. The cube was closed off by a door, next to which there was a large urn. Regulus was sure that his face mirrored the confused gazes of his teammates.

"Well, there you go," McGonagall said encouragingly, motioning them to get to the cube's door. She took a look at her watch. "Your assignment starts … now."

They awkwardly trudged to the door, but before Thompson - who had sacrificed herself, apparently - could open it, a large phoenix appeared. It was a magnificent bird - long, shiny feathers in red and gold. Everyone gasped in awe - even Selwyn, whose general level of indifference and disregard for well, anything, rivalled that of a psychopath.

"Amazing," Potter breathed, stepping closer to take in the sight of the bird. Regulus remembered that they were his favourite animals. Before Potter could stroke the bird - which would have been a stupid move anyway, who touches a bird without invitation? - it started a soft song. It took some time for Regulus to realise it was singing some kind of riddle - the time by which it was over.

"Could we hear it again?" Regulus asked eagerly.

The bird looked at him and Regulus could swear it nodded, before it broke out in a song once again.

"Six you must choose, though eight may call,
Each task will test the strength of all.
From fire, earth, to air and sea,
The way ahead is unity.

One must mix and brew with care,
One must rise and lift the air.
Another solve what's cryptic, bound,
Where light is lost, it must be found.

Through charms of skill and plants of power,

The right notes played will mark the hour.
Yet fate must also lead the way,
For trust in talent wins the day.

Six tasks await, but heed this rhyme:
The heart, not mind, will conquer time.
United, rise, with talents wide,
Only as one will you break the tide."

Once the phoenix had completed the song, the six of them stood in complete silence. Regulus glanced over his teammates cautiously. Thompson and Khan were obviously processing the information presented by the bird, while Coolidge looked between everyone excitedly, probably thinking that his teammates would work it out. Potter was, once again, in the process of ruffling his hair and looked at the ground in contemplation. Selwyn just stared in the distance, her gaze empty. It didn't come as a surprise.

"Okay," Thompson started, "*six you must choose, though eight may call.. Each task will test the strength of all.."*

Regulus nodded. "So we'll have to choose six out of eight-"

"-one for every member," Khan finished his sentence.

"*One must mix and brew with care-"*

"Potions," Potter chipped in.

"*One must rise and lift the air -*"

"That'd be Charms, I guess," Thompson said.

"*Another solve what's cryptic, bound, "*

"Well, that'd be a riddle, right?" Coolidge said cheerfully. "I love those!"

Potter patted him on his shoulder in a weird gesture of praise.

"Which leaves us," Potter continued, " *Where light is lost, it must be found. "*

They took longer to identify this one.

"Light is lost," Regulus said, pacing around. "So there'll be dark…"

“Defence against the Dark Arts!” Coolidge shouted.

Regulus, quickly working through the realisation that the first year Hufflepuff had gotten there faster, nodded. “Yes, Defence.”

“Okay, so there’s four to go - could you sing it another time?” Thompson asked the bird.

The phoenix repeated the song, and Regulus realised that the other part was rather easy.

“*Through charms of skill and plants of power.”*

“That’d be Herbology,” Khan said.

“And ‘*the right notes played will mark the hour*’- music, I guess?” Potter said.

“*Fate must also lead the way …*”

“Fate?” Regulus said dryly. “Well, that is superb. Leaving this all to *fate*.”

Potter smirked. “Some people would be perfectly fine by leaving things up to fate.”

“The last one must be talent,” Thompson said eventually. “So.. we have Potions, Charms, Defence, Herbology, riddles, music, talent and … fate?”

They all took some time to process this information, weighing which of these suited them the best.

“I could do Charms,” Khan said. “It’s my best subject.”

“I’ll take Herbology,” Thompson offered. “If no one else wants it?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Oh, could I have the riddles?” Coolidge asked hopefully.

“Sure, chap,” Potter said, eyeing Regulus with doubt. Regulus copied his look.

“Then … I’ll take Defence, I guess?” Regulus offered.

“Fitting,” Potter said with a challenging arching of his eyebrows.

Regulus didn't dignify this with an answer. "I'll take Potions, then."

"You - potions?" Regulus asked in surprise.

"I happen to know how to brew a potion or two," he said. "Although I'm sure you're also rather experienced in the department."

It was a not so subtle reference to the Dreamless Sleep Potions, and Regulus was very aware that Potter was trying to provoke him. He eyed him intensely, his eyebrows still slightly raised.

"I'm doing alright in most subjects," Regulus retorted coldly.

They turned their heads towards Selwyn, who looked oddly uncomfortable. "So that leaves me with fate, music or talent?"

Regulus felt this was a painful choice - talent in Selwyn's case would probably prolong this assignment by days… Music, well he couldn't really envisage that either and fate, well, perhaps fate *would* be the best case eventually…

"I'll take music," she said eventually. Regulus was about to openly question her choice, when Thompson cut him short and nodded.

"Good choice. Let's start."

Suddenly, the door disappeared, allowing them to step inside. The room beyond undoubtedly enlarged magically, for it was much larger than it had appeared from the outside. As they entered, a soft, dim light filled the space, though it took Regulus a moment to realise its source. Hundreds of lanterns floated gently in the air, suspended at various heights, casting a warm, flickering glow that filled the room like a shimmering maze. Another door awaited at the other side of the room, but it was blocked by a pedestal. The lanterns drifted and swayed, moving unpredictably around the room.

Once they had all entered the room, the Phoenix made his way to the pedestal on the far end of the room, and broke out in another song:

"Among the lights, one truth you'll find,
No hand may touch, nor spell unbind.
Through flame and flood, it will endure,
Test each with care—only one is pure.

Seven chances, no more, no less,
Each trial reveals your lantern's test.

For the right will shine, though others fold,
In the end, its light grows bold.

When darkness fades, the path is clear,
Set light to rest, and you'll draw near."

Regulus groaned - another riddle. This must be the day of Coolidge's wildest dreams.

"Okay," Khan said contemplating, "this is Charms - there is one light, that may not be touched?"

"It will 'endure through flame and flood'," Thompson added.

"And one is pure? I guess that'll be the right one?"

"Yes," Regulus nodded. "I think you'll have 'seven chances' to reveal the right lantern and well, that's the one that'll get us through the door…"

He looked warily at Khan - surely, as a sixth-year, she would know enough about Charms to get them across the room… Still, Regulus didn't really like to leave things in other people's hands, and well… What if Khan screwed up? Regulus considered this for a moment, realising that not a lot would happen if they didn't succeed - sure, they'd end last, they'd be the biggest losers of this stupid competition, but it wouldn't have any consequences besides their own wounded pride. It personally felt like a high price to pay for Regulus, always eager to be one of the best, if not best, at everything, but he also knew rationally that one couldn't always end first.

"Okay," Khan said, clearly concentrating very hard. "Said lantern endures water and flame… so others will not, I presume?" She nodded, as if trying to convince herself, and then pointed her wand at the lanterns in the air and shrieked: "Aqua Eructo!"

A large jet of water erupted from her wand, which she directed at the collection of floating lanterns, and indeed - the light of some lanterns died out. She then stuck her wand into the same direction and shrieked: "Incendio!" A couple of lanterns burst into massive flames, forcing all the students to jolt backwards from the heat, and then, in an instant, they were reduced to ashes.

"Wow," Coolidge said, in awe. "*Cool.*"

Khan continued her quest for the right lantern - exploding a few,

vanishing a couple, then reducing some to the size of a crumb, painting some red - all the lanterns affected by her magic being distinguished from the one that they needed to get across… The problem being that, after having casted seven spells, there were still several lanterns floating in the air, and they had *no* idea which was the right one.

“Look at that,” Potter said with a smirk. “It comes down to fate after all.”

Regulus shot him an irritated look. “There must be some logic in here - one that looks different, feels different…”

They all squeezed their eyes in concentration, their gaze trailing slowly over the lanterns, trying to find something that made one stand out… The fact that the lanterns were moving, though, made this a rather difficult task.

“That one,” Khan said, pointing at a lantern on the left. “Look - it looks … older. More… ancient.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows and then took a closer look - and indeed, the light flickered slower, the glass was dusty, a spider’s web spun across the handle and the glass…

Khan raised her wand and levitated the lantern to the pedestal slowly, like she was afraid to break it - and then, lowered it carefully and - with a flash, the entire room was lit, the pedestal gone, and a door appeared.

Once they stepped through the door, it was as if they were back in the front of the former room, as if they were stuck in a loop.

“Ai,” complained Thompson. “That’s *weird*.”

“This entire thing is strange,” Selwyn complained. “What’s the use of all of this?”

Regulus - miraculously so - couldn’t help but agree. It wasn’t that bad, to be honest, and he liked a challenge; but in light of house unity and all that bollocks, it didn’t really feel like they were doing something useful.

The room they were in now, though, was different - it was completely empty, but the stone floor was gone, replaced by a large, green swamp instead. There were five pedestals lined up in front of them.

“Here we go again with the pillars,” Selwyn said darkly.

“I think this will be me?” Thompson said. “The swamp… this must be herbology, right?”

Regulus agreed. Before they could discuss it, however, the phoenix appeared again.

“Five fierce plants, their threats concealed,
To cure their bite, the truth’s revealed.
The one which’s venom strikes with force,
Its poison’s sharp—beware its course.

The one which’s cry will steal your breath,
Its scream brings only near to death.
Then the one, with vines that squeeze,
Will trap you fast and never ease.

The one that in shadows clings,
It tightens fast, where light it brings.
Then the one with teeth so sharp,
It bites through flesh with a single snap.

To save yourself, you must combine,
The antidote, from nature’s vine.”

Thompson nodded. “Well, that’s easy.”

Regulus glanced around awkwardly, trying to find Potter’s gaze. He was clearly looking for him as well.

“Easy?” he mouthed.

“I know,” Regulus breathed in return.

“In what world is this easy?” Selwyn asked.

“Well,” Thompson started, “five plants that are threatening or venomous in some way, and I’ll have to come up with the antidote…”

“Yes, that I understood,” Khan said. “But which plants though?”

“Well, ‘*the one which’s venom strikes with force… its poison’s sharp, beware its course'* - that’d be Venomous tentacula.”

And on cue, the plant appeared on one of the pillars.

“Then, *‘the one which’s cry will steal your breath, its scream brings only near to death*’-”

“-mandrake,” Regulus said.

And indeed, the mandrake appeared, although silent, since it was potted.

Thompson nodded. “Then there’s Snargaluff - 'with vines that squeeze, will trap you fast and never ease'-”

And on cue, the plant appeared on the third pillar.

“How would you know it’s not something else, like devil’s snare or anything else?” Potter said, clearly impressed by Thompson’s knowledge.

“Well - the *vines* are really distinguishable, and - well, the devil’s snare-”

Potter himself completed her sentence, “Ah, yes, ‘*the one that in shadows clings’.*”

“Yes,” Thompson smiled proudly. “Very good.”

And again, the Devil’s snare appeared on the fourth pillar.

“That leaves one,” Selwyn said coldly, like she was completely unimpressed by her fellow students’ intelligence.

“Yes, that one is harder,” Thompson said, stroking her chin in thought. “*It bites through flesh with a single snap’*... Let me think… Yes, that would be … Chinese Chomping Cabbage!”

And indeed, the fifth pillar now supported the plant.

“And now the antidotes,” Thompson said. “I don’t know - do I … just name them?”

“It’s not really all antidotes now, is it?” Khan questioned. Regulus had to admit this was a sharp observation. “I mean, the Chinese Chomping Cabbage isn’t really venomous or something, so you wouldn’t need an antidote.”

Thompson agreed. “True, but we - or I - will have to come up with some way to deal with it… Let me think…

“Okay, let us help,” Potter said in his optimistic voice. “So, Mandrake, it just… you just shouldn’t depot it, then you’re alright…”

“And if you do,” Khan nodded, “you’d want something to block out the sounds.”

“Earmuffs!” Thompson shrieked victoriously. And with a flick of her wand, she conjured up a pair. Regulus had to admit he was rather impressed by it. Apparently the girl was good at Transfiguration too. She levitated the pair of earmuffs over to the Mandrake, which, together with the pillar it was placed onto, instantly disappeared.

“Okay, the Devil’s snare is easy,” she continued. “Fire.” She conjured up some flames and directed them at the Devil’s Snare, making it meet the same fate as the previous plant.

“Okay, so, the Venomous Tentacula would be… a severing charm-” the plant was gone with the flick of her wand “the Cabbage wants a carrot-” the same happened to the Chinese plant “-but that leaves us with … the Snargaluff. I have *no* clue what to do with Snargaluff.”

And it was silent.

Regulus also had no clue - he’d seen the plant before in the garden at Black Manor, and the only thing he knew about it was you’d better give them a wide berth. Once they felt threatened by your presence, the tentacles would spring alive and catch you.

“I don’t know either,” Regulus said, sighing. His teammates all murmured similar sensations.

“You can’t really *do* anything, right? Potter chipped in.

“Yes, that’s a brilliant observation, Potter,” Regulus said dryly.

Potter shot him a fierce glare. “No - I mean, as long as you don’t *do* anything, it wouldn’t attack you, right?”

Thompson nodded. “True… Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

Regulus was clearly missing something, for he had no clue what they were talking about.

“Yes,” Potter grinned.

Thompson took a step closer to the pillar, and said: “For you, I need

no remedy, as long as I don't upset you or just don't get near you."

And with that, the last plant and pillar disappeared. It was quickly followed by the swamp, and again, they felt the sensation of being pulled back to the front of the room, as if restarting the loop.

"Creepy," Selwyn said with a shudder.

It was immediately clear who was to complete the next part of the relay. The room was now again dimly-lit, but with a desk in the middle, entirely empty barring one thing - a cauldron.

"I guess this is me," Potter said. The phoenix returned, settled down on the desk, and sang:

"A potion to wake, to heal, and to mend,
From poison or curse, this draught will defend.
But knowledge is key, and words must be true,
Speak each component, and they'll come to you.

With root, bark, and essence blend,
The Wiggenweld shall be your friend."

Ah, the Wiggenweld Potion… It wasn't a very hard potion to brew - they had done it multiple times over the years during potions - but it was without a doubt quite the task if you didn't have the ingredients or instructions. Regulus looked questionably at Potter, who scratched his head awkwardly.

"Okay, I know this," he said, trying to assure himself. It made Regulus rather nervous. "I have done this before. Let me think… Let me think… Okay, so, I'll need… murtlap essense, honeywater, wormwood essence…"

And to Regulus's utter astonishment, the bloke managed to drum up the entire list of ingredients for the potion. All the ingredients, together with the needed tools, appeared at the table at which he moved to sit.

"Impressive, Potter," Thompson nodded.

Potter shot Regulus a smug smirk, as if he were trying to get a compliment out of him as well, but Regulus retorted with a sarcastic look.

"You focus on brewing it now, Potter," Regulus said. And Potter did -

it was impressive. Again, the potion itself wasn't that hard, but to remember, from all the potions they'd ever brewed in their career at Hogwarts, exactly when to stir and in which direction, when to boil and when to sudder, it was impressive. After some twenty minutes, while all his teammates were probably annoying him to the bone with their hovering and watching, Potter let out a deep sigh and said, "Finished."

He poured some of it in a vail and put it back on the table, after which, again, they were returned to the start of the room.

This time, the room was truly empty - no single desk, no pillars - empty. At least, until the Phoenix entered and lingered in the air in the middle of the space, singing:

"I am the beginning of the end,
And the end of before,
I'm lighter than air,
But cannot be seen.

I'm the key to your task,
Though I don't make a sound,
Without me, you're lost,
But with me, you're found."

It went completely silent once the bird had sung his lines.

"This must be the riddle," Thompson realised. "This is you, Gregor!"

He asked the phoenix to repeat the song - and again, and again, and again…

Regulus couldn't blame him. He had no clue where to start. The beginning of the end? Like, the last phase? The end of before? As in… previously? Lighter than air, cannot be seen - Regulus could only think of something like gas, but that made no sense whatsoever. The second part of the riddle was also of no help; Regulus was quite aware of the fact that the riddle was the 'key to the task' and that they were completely, utterly lost without the answer.

Coolidge seemed to realise this as well, as he was pacing up and down the same trail, thinking hard. He'd lift his hand and tilt his head once every while as if the answer was on the tip of his tongue, but then seemed to take it back to return to the same path.

Regulus tried to meet the eyes of his other teammates. They were all

eyeing Coolidge in doubt, probably trying to work out the riddle themselves as well. They had two passes, anyway - so if Coolidge didn't work it out, one of them was allowed to… Using them for Coolidge's and Selwyn's tasks would be so bloody predictable. Surely they wouldn't need him for Regulus's track.

And then, Coolidge broke the silence.

"Yes!" he roared. "I think I have it!"

Regulus looked at him in disbelief.

"Yes," he repeated, taking in his teammates' gazes. "Look - so it's a *letter* because it is lighter than air and cannot be seen." Regulus was sure there were plenty other things that would meet these criteria. Not that he could name any of these, though. But this looked rather far-fetched. "The letter doesn't make a sound but it *is* a necessary letter for the language." Ah, Regulus had interpreted that part quite differently. Coolidge looked at his teammates eagerly, as if he was waiting for them to figure it out. They did not, though - instead eyeing him with completely blank eyes. "It is the beginning of *end*, and the end of *before*."

Potter clapped his hands in some kind of eureka moment, which made Regulus feel rather stupid, for he still had no clue what Coolidge was on about.

"It's the letter E!" Coolidge said, jumping in excitement.

Oooh. The beginning of *end*, the end of *before* … Yes, that made sense. What a stupid, simple riddle.

And then, all of a sudden, they were jolted back again, standing in the same room again. This time, though, the room wasn't empty, but housed a chair and a harp. This must be the musical task. Regulus looked warily at Selwyn, who took a step forward, showing no emotion at all. *Surely* the girl was a psychopath.

The Phoenix joined them again.

"*To make your way, you need a tune,*
A melody bright, or night's dark croon.
Five notes in order, play them right,
The path will open, from dark to light.

Not by might, but by sound you'll lead,

With ears that hear, you will succeed."

Regulus was rather concerned by this riddle - he was sure that Selwyn was too thick to even work out the riddle, let alone do what the riddle revealed she had to do. Well, at least they still had their passes. Would they be allowed to use both of them in one track?

Selwyn, however, didn't look concerned at all and sat down on the chair with a bored expression on her face. She played five, seemingly completely random, notes, and rose from her seat again.

Regulus broke out in laughter - the girl *really* thought she could just play five random notes and be done with it? Really, how she *still* managed to amaze him with her stupidity was a-

All of a sudden, they were snapped back into the loop.

"What?" Regulus said in complete astonishment. She'd done it? She'd 'unlocked' the melody, the secret tune with five notes in a split second? She'd gotten through a round quicker than any of her teammates - even the *seventh-year Ravenclaw?*

He had no time to give it any more thought, however, for Coolidge's voice forced him away from his thoughts.

"We're almost there!" Coolidge said cheerfully. "I can't believe we've made it so far!"

"Coolidge," Regulus said with raised eyebrows, "*you're* supposed to be the optimistic one. If you don't have faith in us, who will?"

This earned him a beaming smile from Coolidge and a snorting laugh from Potter.

"Yes, and don't go jinxing it," Potter continued. "The floor is yours, Black."

Regulus looked at the room and realised that it had gone completely dark instantly. The phoenix returned, and it was the only thing providing light in the room, for its feathers seemed to be lit. It sang:

"Ahead lies darkness, dangers untold,
Your strength, your wits, your heart must hold.
First, seek the cursed, objects in disguise,
Find the trap where dark magic lies.

Through creatures fierce, with spells in hand,
Confront the foe, make your stand.
Then find the flames, the wind, the wall,
Master their power or risk the fall.

A shapeless fear will take its form,
Laugh to break its curse and storm.
But beware the chill that comes at last,
A Patronus bright must hold it fast."

Regulus nodded in determination and stepped forward, his hand raised. He was ready.

Now, afterwards, he'd argue that his track was definitely the most difficult - he didn't have to just brew a potion or identify some plants, no - he had to do it all. He had the dark creatures to combat, but also the numerous spells to block or bypass… He was positive that his track was the only one *that* demanding as for a variety of knowledge and applying it.

It started out rather easy - '*seek the cursed, objects in disguise'*. The room was filled with all kinds of rubbish - books, lamps, rubber ducks, a Quaffle, a plate of pumpkin pies and the like. He used the Homenum Revelio to detect the magic, then tried a random series of Finite Incantatem on all the objects. When he hit the rubber ducks, the room was suddenly filling up with dark smoke, having Selwyn shriek in an annoyingly high voice that was, as far as Regulus was concerned, way more alarming than the smoke that was about to smother him. An Evanesco cleared the air, and that was that. Then, he was attacked by a Grindylow that was wrapped by a bubble of water. It came very unsuspected and Regulus even let out quite an embarrassing shriek before he quickly shouted "Impedimenta!" which slowed it down, after which he paralysed it and then, simply, burst the bubble of water. It disappeared immediately.

Regulus had no regard for his teammates - he was completely consumed by the task, moving swiftly and thinking hard simultaneously.

Which was a good thing, because the 'flames, wind, wall' part of the riddle started, and quite literally so. He was met by a flame barrier, reaching high to the ceiling, moving dangerously as if a breeze of wind was pestering it. The flames were spreading, but Regulus quickly casted the Aguamenti spell, extinguishing the flames. Before he could even process what had just happened, he heard the sissing sound of

Poisonous Gad Cloud. He conjured a Bubble-Head charm and subsequently used Evnesco to clear the air. Then he was suddenly bombarded by soft balls - that were, although soft, *very* annoying. He thought about the weird notion of him being attacked by *soft* balls when he realised they were coming at him at a quicker pace. He had to think of something quickly, before he would be completely distracted - and then he quickly cast a shielding charm, making the balls drop when reaching the barrier and ultimately, disappear.

Regulus sighed, and felt rather uneasy when the entire room went dark and silent. He looked over his shoulder at his teammates. It was hard to make out who was who, since there was nothing but the glimmering of eyes and sounds of breathing that indicated they were still there, when a small light appeared. It came from a small candle on top of a rather large wardrobe. Regulus found this very weird - he had to fight a *wardrobe*? Certainly it had to mean something? He tried to get back to the riddle that the phoenix had sung, but he'd forgotten most of it, at least the last part…

"Perhaps you have to open it," Potter suggested, feeling Regulus's indecisiveness.

Regulus shrugged in resigned acceptance, his fingers tightening around his wand as he whispered, "Alohomora." The wardrobe creaked open slowly, its wood groaning, filling the room with ominous tension. It was as though the air had thickened, becoming suffocating and heavy. He felt his teammates holding their breath, anticipation pooling in the silence that followed the wardrobe's final, ominous creak.

And then, all of a sudden, from the darkness, a man walked out.

Regulus's heart seized in his chest.

To anyone else, the man would've looked completely ordinary - there was nothing special about him, nothing that would make him stand out either way; not too handsome, but not uneasy on the eyes either. His clothes indicating that he wasn't filthy rich but neither severely poor. There was, truly, nothing special about him.

Except that there was.

Regulus stopped dead in his tracks. All senses drained from him, he had turned completely numb. There was a strange thing happening in his throat - it had gone completely dry as he choked, yet housing the violent hammering of his heart. His entire body trembled in complete

and utter shock. He couldn't fucking *breathe* - he wanted to scream, to run, to fight, but he was nailed to the ground. There was truly, genuinely, seriously, nothing that he could do. Just as he hadn't back then. Trapped in the same helplessness that had gripped him so many times before. He could try how hard he wanted, whenever he wanted, but in the end, it wouldn't matter.

There was nothing he could do. Just like then.

He tried to say something, not to his surroundings, as he had shut them out entirely - he was sure that his soul would just rip apart on the spot if he'd realised in that moment that there were people witnessing the rawest, the most private, the most muffled part of his life. No, in his experience, he was completely alone. Just as he had been back then. Alone, utterly alone, left to his fate, screaming into the void. He could scream, cry, plead, but no one would hear him. No one ever did.

But then, all of a sudden, he felt a warm hand on his shoulder. A grounding pressure. It took a couple of jolts for him to register that the hand was real, and belonged to someone.

Regulus snapped back to the present. The hand was Potter's.

"It's a Boggart," he whispered. His voice was low, but steady. "It's just a Boggart."

Regulus felt a wave of emotions surge through him, threatening to drown him - shame, fear, sadness… His throat tightened, and he forced himself to breathe, to contain the storm raging within. He closed his eyes, pushing the emotions down, hard, before raising his wand. He thought of an exploding bowl of candy, and said, with all the strength he could muster: "Riddikulus."

And with that, Regulus's biggest nightmare disappeared. If it only had been that easy back then…

Now, Regulus tried his very best to compose himself and forced a mask of indifference over the wound that had just been exposed. He pretended that it wasn't Potter and S *elwyn* - *Sabrina Selwyn* who had just had a glimpse at the rawest part of his soul. He tried to feign a level of indifference trying to downplay the severity of what had just happened, but he couldn't meet anyone's eyes, least of all Potter's. His body still trembled from the aftermath of the Boggart's attack, and his mind was scattered, off-balance.

And that's when the Dementors appeared.

They swarmed in, filling the air with their icy presence - bloody soulsucking creatures that were very eager to devour whatever was left of him. Although he felt their grip tightening around him, their presence actually didn't make that much of a difference - it didn't feel much different from the despair already gnawing at him from within. They just seemed to blend into the emotions that were already consuming him. That would have been a positive notion, were it not for the fact that it'd be completely impossible for him to conjure up a happy memory in his head in his current state, and well, that was what he'd need to repel them. He tried *very* hard. Quidditch victories flushed before him - moments of fleeting joy, but they slipped away like sand. The thought of Isa, the warmth of her smile, the comfort of her presence, the feeling of her hands. Now it felt distant, unreachable, like she had never existed… He even thought of Sirius, making memories of his brother resurface. All the pain, despair and helplessness that he thought were from the past, were now very much woven into the present and would set the course for his future… He couldn't imagine feeling light or happiness again, not now. Not ever.

"Here, I'll give it a go." It was again Potter's voice that brought Regulus back to reality. "Expecto Patronum!"

And with that, Potter sent off a gleaming, powerful stag, charging at the Dementors, forcing them to retreat. In a split second, the atmosphere shifted. The room snapped back to normal - no despair, no eerie darkness, no Dementors. Just a plain, brightly lit cube with a door waiting for them. The room was completely silent except for the sound of Regulus's still-shaky breath.

Regulus was too distracted to hear any of McGonagall's praise once they re-entered the Great Hall. All the voices were drawn out to the background, reduced to muffled noises and empty sounds.

He made his way out of the Entrance Hall as quickly as he could without raising suspicion, very eager to avoid eye contact with anyone. Once the door fell shut behind him, he accelerated to a quicker pace, first trotting, then outrightly speeding to the nearest bathroom. He bursted into the stall, took in a deep breath, and then emptied his entire stomach in the toilet.

Chapter 12: Of Balls & Loyalties

“Finally,” Isa sighed. “About bloody time we’re off doing nothing for two weeks.”

“Like you’re not going to do homework over the holidays,” Amaryllis shot her with a snort.

“Well, at least I won’t waste half the day in class.”

They were on the Hogwarts Express, taking them back to King’s Cross to be delivered off to their families. It was quite crowded in their compartment, with Regulus, Isa, Barty, Evan and Amaryllis crammed into the small carriage. Regulus was trying to read a book - *Discorsi* by Machiavelli - but was distracted all the time by his friends’ conversations he was drawn into, or the repulsive snogging he was forced to watch. Isa was similarly appalled by the public displays of affection– or whatever they were supposed to be – and had become quite adept at jinxing the lot of them without warning whenever too much saliva was being exchanged.

“You should just drop a few subjects,” Melania suggested. “With all these ASS-obligations - Hogwarts this year is going to be the end of you.”

Isa laughed darkly at the idea of her dropping any subjects but clearly didn’t feel like getting into the multilayered complexities of parental approval and just didn’t respond.

“How was that relay-thing you had to do, anyway?” Barty asked.

Regulus subtly tried to avoid having to answer this question by blocking himself from his friends’ view with his book, in which he pretended to be very immersed.

Evan kicked him in the shin to draw his attention. “Yes, Black, you haven’t told us about it yet – you guys did finish *first*.”

“Yes, I was meaning to ask Sabrina about it but then-”

“You haven’t discussed it with Selwyn?” Regulus cut her short. He knew there was a hopeful tone in his voice that he eagerly tried to polish away instantly. “She hasn’t said anything about … what we had to do… and all?” He saw that Isa had raised her eyebrows in the

corner of his eyes, but pretended not to notice it.

“No - she’s only told it was alright, seemed quite cheerful about it all–”

This struck Regulus as a very strange state for Selwyn to be in.

“*Cheerful*?” Isa voiced the similar concerns.

“Well, yes, you guys had to do all kinds of difficult assignments, and she just had to play a melody on a harp and that was that.”

“It wasn’t even a melody,” Regulus said very sourly. “She literally played five notes. I still don’t get what she did or why, but it worked.”

“Yes, Sabrina is quite musically gifted,” Melania explained.

Regulus supposed the statement was based on something, but he had nothing to go on, so he shrugged. “I guess. I just had to cast a few spells – detect some dark magic, get rid of a Boggart…” Internally he shuddered at the thought. He chose not to tell them that he also had to repel some Dementors, but that *Potter* had to come to his rescue. Really, the thought in his head was already very hard to live with – confessing it to his friends…

Regulus had miraculously managed to avoid Potter like the plague. Where he had run into the bloke in all kinds of unfortunate circumstances before, he now looked to have consumed his meal already before Regulus entered the Great Hall, to have left the locker room already when they had had Quidditch practice consecutively and generally to not come within the radius of tens of yards. Regulus had no idea whether this was a deliberate policy because he had spooked the bloke with the rather unpleasant things that had occurred at the end of the relay, or that it was just a coincidence – but it pleased Regulus either way.

Sure, everytime he thought about the group of students facing Regulus’s worst nightmare, and his foolish, embarrassing inability to cope with it – or the Dementors for that matter – he felt the shame washing over him like a cloak about to smother him. But he also rationally knew that as long as he pretended nothing had really happened, his fellow contestants probably wouldn’t give it much thought and would perhaps forget about it. At least – that was what Regulus repeated in his head over and over again in an attempt to keep himself sane.

“I heard your track was quite disastrous,” Amaryllis pointed at Isa.

Isa nodded. “Yes, with that many students just completely *thrilled* by this competition, you’d expect we did a marvellous job. But no – Longbottom and Lupin just kept arguing and that second-year Ravenclaw thought she had everything figured out.”

“Yes, I heard the only reason why you ended third was because of your ‘swift thinking and smooth cooperation’ with Davies,” Amaryllis repeated the information she’d obviously obtained through the gossip mill.

Isa shot her a wry smile that Regulus couldn’t really place. “Yes, well – I am sure the other two assignments will be just as lovely.”

“Nothing tops Selwyn on the harp,” Regulus chipped in. They all laughed.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing Davies with a harp, though,” Melania giggled. Regulus found this comment rather strange, mostly seeing the arm around her waist that belonged to Evan. He looked disgruntled.

“Oh yes, he’s supposed to be a very good singer *and* he plays the guitar. And he’s an artist, apparently — you know, he draws…” Amaryllis said matter-of-factly.

“He must be a Mudblood then, if he plays the guitar,” Evan threw in, attempting to disgrace the seemingly perfect bloke in some way. Regulus couldn’t really blame him, seeing his sort-of girlfriend was openly swooning over him.

“Halfblood,” Isa said, rather stiffly. “Apparently.”

“So, none of you are travelling for the holidays?” Evan eagerly changed the subject. Everyone shook their heads.

“So we’ll all be attending the annual ball?” Amaryllis asked excitedly.

Regulus looked at Barty cautiously. He had never been to the Annual Christmas Ball at Dreadmoor Keep. It wasn’t unusual for politicians like Barty’s father – even conformist ones – to attend, but somehow Barty Crouch Sr. had always avoided the crowd that Cissy’s place seemed to attract. Still, Crouch Sr. would nearly always be too busy to be at home on Christmas Eve, meaning that Barty spent it with his mum alone. Although Regulus had never been at Barty’s and had only seen his mother swiftly at King’s Cross, the bits and pieces that Barty

had shared over the years painted the picture of Barty being everything to her – her only son, the one person filling the gaping hole that the continuous absence of Crouch Sr. left behind.

“Yes,” Isa said grumpily. “I tried to get out of it by offering to babysit my sisters, but Mum wasn’t having it.”

“Ah, don’t despair, Isa,” Evan smirked. “This year, even Barty will be there!”

“Yes,” Barty said proudly. “Mum is visiting her Aunt in Germany, so I will stay over at Evan’s part of the holidays.”

Regulus realised that he must have been very busy to not have heard anything about this plan before. It gave him an uneasy feeling, but he quickly shrugged it off and went back to his book.

He had missed most of the remainder of the journey, reading Machiavelli’s treatise about the strengths and virtues of a republic, so it was quite a shock when he realised that they would soon arrive at the station. Luckily, he had exchanged his Hogwarts robes for his own already at the beginning of the journey, meaning that there was nothing left to do but to throw his book in his trunk.

"“I’ll come by one of these days,” Isa said to Regulus, her voice quiet in the now-empty compartment. Everyone else had already left, but Regulus, as always, lingered, knowing that his brother would do the same so they could exit the Hogwarts Express together and make their way towards Mother as a united front. For Sirius it was a way to safeguard some buffer between him and Mother, and for Regulus it was a way to please Mother, securing at least one of two relatively peaceful days before things would undoubtedly go downhill.

Isa winked warmly and then went out of sight when she got off the carriage. Regulus reluctantly made his way to the other side of the train, lugging his trunk along in a way that very much gave away how much he was dreading the prospect of two weeks of his brother and Mother under the same roof.

"See you soon, mate," Regulus heard his brother say, his voice tinged with an unusual sadness.

“Hang in there, mate,” Potter retorted, his tone light but edged with understanding. It was only when Regulus neared the exit that Potter seemed to notice his presence, looking up at Regulus’s face with a contemplative look in his eyes… Regulus looked at him coldly, the icy

stature functioning as a harness against the unsettling memories that Potter evoked.

Just when he would have disappeared around the corner, Potter stopped in his tracks, returned his gaze to interlock Regulus's, and said: "Alright, Black?"

Regulus raised his eyebrows. "Marvellous, Potter."

Potter nodded and disappeared with a wry smile.

*****

The first days of the holidays, Regulus had a weird feeling in his gut – he couldn't place nor name it, but afterwards he would translate it as some kind of omen for what was to come. A sixth sense trying to warn him of what was about to unfold, what was about to be set in motion that could never, ever be reversed.

He didn't know that though, so the days leading up to the Annual Christmas Ball, he attributed the feeling that something was off to the persistent presence of Sirius. Sure, the brothers would be allies during the holidays – as opposed to the complete strangers they pretended to be during their days at Hogwarts – but they would still spend much of their time apart from each other; Sirius plotting Merlin-knows-what and talking with Potter through that stupid mirror, Regulus focusing on his books and homework. Only when Regulus had grown bored with the reading and needed a break, and Sirius was ditched by Potter because the latter had actual things to undertake with his family, they would pull towards each other and play a couple of games of Chess or – when Mother wasn't around – Exploding Snap.

This holiday was different though, for Regulus seemed to keep running into his brother all the time – he'd join them in the library at Grimmauld Place, they'd both end up reading in the Drawing room and after dinner, Sirius would even linger at the Kitchen – the place he hated with every vein in his body.

So, two days before Christmas Eve was no different, with Regulus deeply engrossed by Sirius's next move in a suspenseful game of Wizarding Chess.

"Bold, brother," he said.

Sirius shot him a smug smirk. "I know."

“Reg! Sorry to just barge in, but your mother said –”

In the library’s doorway was Isa, carrying a large parcel in her hand, and a very stunned expression on her face. She stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Sirius and Regulus seemingly playing a friendly game of chess.

“Oh, am I interrupting… something?”

Sirius, generally pleased by people’s discomfort, smirked. “Ms. Nott - what a pleasure.”

“Likewise,” she said stiffly. “So, who’s winning?” She took a chair and settled down at the table between the brothers Black.

“Me, obviously,” Sirius grinned. This wasn’t true, though – it was too soon to tell, and Regulus nearly always beat his brother. He suspected his brother didn’t even like the game, but was just bored out of his mind.

Regulus shot Isa a look indicating she shouldn’t believe a word coming out of his brother’s mouth.

“So, what brings you to the cheerful site of Grimmauld Place?” Sirius said sarcastically, eyeing the package in her lap curiously. Isa looked visibly uncomfortable about him prying and shot Regulus a questioning look. “Oh, we brothers don’t have anything to hide from each other,” Sirius continued with a smirk. “Right, Reg?”

Regulus rolled his eyes.

“It’s just… your Christmas present,” Isa said, shifting in her chair nervously, almost looking… embarrassed.

Both Regulus and Sirius arched their eyebrows. “You came all the way here to hand over a Christmas present?” Sirius sniggered.

Isa shot him a warning glare. “Never had anyone give you a present before?”

“Well, yes,” Sirius answered with a contemplative shrug. “But they’d just have it delivered, you know, on Christmas morning…”

“Well, yes, I’d like to give it in person,” she said proudly, but slightly flustered, and she handed the parcel over to Regulus.

Regulus had just bought her new earrings that Cissy had advised on,

and would Kreacher have it delivered on Christmas morning, something she could have let her House Elf, Sable, do too, so he was rather curious about the quite heavy thing in his hand. He immediately identified it as a book. Cautiously he unwrapped it, the curious eyes of his brother glued to the process.

He held it up, and read the title. *The Virtuous City* by *Al-Farabi*. He turned it around and quickly read the back cover.

In this illuminating masterpiece, The Virtuous City, Al-Farabi intricately weaves the threads of philosophy and governance to envision an ideal society. With profound wisdom, he articulates the principles that define a just and harmonious city, where virtuous leaders guide their citizens toward the common good. Al-Farabi explores the delicate balance between moral integrity and political power, emphasising that true strength lies not in military might, but in the cultivation of wisdom and virtue. This timeless work invites readers to reflect on the nature of justice, the role of ethics in leadership, and the aspiration for a flourishing community. Immerse yourself in Al-Farabi's vision, and embark on a journey toward understanding the essence of a virtuous life.

"Wow, Ies," he said gratefully.

Isa immediately started that annoying thing girls tended to do when they handed over a present they were insecure about – chattering and jabbering about all the reasons behind the purchase, how they'd understand if they'd better return it and so on. "So, since you're all into philosophy now – and well, Father mentioned him once, the author's Persian – it was *really* hard to get my hands on a complete, English translation – you obviously don't know Arabic -"

"Stop, Ies," Regulus smiled. "It's perfect, truly– thank you."

He had no eye for his brother, who watched the exchange with interest, and gave her an appreciative, warm smile.

"Good," she smiled. "It *is rather* hard to find a suitable present for you, you know."

Regulus scoffed. "Says the princess that literally has all that her heart could possibly desire…"

Isa dignified this with a bark of laughter and then returned her attention back to the game of chess. "Now, let me see, who is really the champion between you?"

Later that night, when Isa had returned home through the fireplace and Regulus was about to enter his bedroom to go to sleep, he bumped into Sirius on the fourth floor's landing.

"Good to see you've upgraded your relationship," he smirked.

Regulus rolled his eyes in annoyance and sighed. "There is no relationship between Isa and me – at least not romantically."

"Yeah," Sirius said, the disbelief plain in his voice, "I don't believe that – you two might not realise it yet…"

Regulus snorted. "The people in the relationship might be the ones not realising they're in a relationship?"

Now it was Sirius's turn to roll his eyes. "You might not realise you fancy each other."

"No fancying, brother," Regulus explained again. "Just friends."

He opened his bedroom's door and was about to step inside, when Sirius seized his arm.

"Don't let her go, Regulus," he said, a warning tone lacing his voice. "She clearly cares about you. And well, that is something to cherish these days…"

And with those words, oddly wise for Sirius to express, he let go of Regulus and made his way to his bedroom, leaving a rather startled Regulus behind.

*****

The night before Christmas Eve, the bomb at 12 Grimmauld Place exploded at last - the detonation of which was a marvellous collaborative project by Mother and Sirius. It would be the starting signal of a larger, bloodier conflict, but that was something that Regulus only got to know afterwards, which is often how these things went.

It was one of the rare moments that Regulus found himself with both Mother and Sirius in the room. Regulus had just started the book Isa had gifted him, while Mother was silently working on a letter at one of the desks in the Drawing Room. Up until that moment, there had been a rather strange and peaceful status-quo between his brother and his mother – sure, it had just been a couple of days, but apart from

some below-the-belt comments and some nasty cursing following the coverage of another Muggle attack in the Prophet, there had been no major confrontations between the two.

Sirius entered the drawing room grumpily and Regulus immediately felt that he was looking to pick a fight – he was like Mother in that way. They couldn't cope with their emotions properly and always needed an external instrument functioning as an emotional outlet in disguise. For Mother, that would often come in the form of Kreacher or her sons – Regulus being too shy and stiff and awkward, Sirius acting respectless, mingling with the wrong crowd and generally being an ungrateful swine.

"Reading again?" he asked, settling down across Regulus with his hands and feet moving restlessly.

"Obviously," Regulus answered stiffly above his book, eyeing Mother warily from the corner of his eyes.

"Swot."

Now, Sirius in this state was controllable – you'd have to give him a bait, something to clutch onto and keep him satisfied, but not something too big so that the entire thing would explode.

Mother alone was also manageable – give her something to rant on about, like the current state of the world or her sons' bedrooms, but nothing bordering the feasible prospect of her losing the Black heir to the ideology of blood traitors and modernism.

The two of them in that state together, though – that was *horrible*. Considering Father was generally absent and otherwise as engaging as a corpse, it was always Regulus that would try to steer the precarious situation in a more peaceful direction – something that had already cost him much of his blood, sweat and tears throughout the years.

And, unfortunately, when Mother turned around from the desk with the quill raised in her hand in a dangerous way, Regulus realised that he, once again, found himself in such a situation. He sighed in exasperation.

"Sirius," Mother said, the disdain evident in her voice. Regulus was sure that the room had just turned a couple of degrees colder by the icy tone of her voice. "You will attend the ball tomorrow properly dressed and acting in a manner befitting our family name. Do you understand?"

"'Befitting our family name'," Sirius repeated mockingly. "That'd be adulterous, bigoted and incestrous, am I correct?"

Regulus's eyes grew as he awkwardly took in the sight in front of him. They both raised from their seats and stood facing each other in some kind of violent stare-off. Regulus was very tempted to test his tactic of slowly phasing out of the room, but he realised that he'd better navigate this situation to quiet waters seeing the ball they were to attend the next day. He knew that, in the case of a full-blown confrontation between Mother and Sirius, his brother was very unlikely to behave at the public event. And how bad things could turn bad at home – Sirius misbehaving at public events always provoked a unique level of fury from Mother.

"Let's call it a night, alright?" Regulus suggested, but his voice was drawn out by the shrill voice of Mother whose fury seemed to tower over Sirius despite the fact that she was at least ten inches shorter.

"Ah, here we go again—Sirius Black III, the insufferable child who, despite never having earned a Knut of his own, eaten from a plate he didn't inherit, or drawn a single breath outside the comforts we provided, always imagines he knows better than those who raised him!"

"Now, let's just cool–"

"Well, *Mother*, forgive me for not worshipping the silver spoon I was born with – you'd have noticed I'm not interested in your stupid, bigoted, pureblood insanity if you didn't spend so much time polishing the family crest!"

"How about we leave–"

"Oh yes, how *noble*. You think turning your back on your *family*, on *tradition* makes you a martyr? It makes you nothing more than an ungrateful, arrogant and childish pig!"

"We could also–"

"Anything's better than a bunch of sexist, blood-obsessed lunatics clinging to their old worthless traditions!"

"Now, come on, you two–"

"You are *nothing* without us, Sirius!" Mother shrieked furiously. She and Sirius were so close they were almost touching, their eyes filled

with fury and hatred. “You’re nothing but a *pathetic boy*. Too weak to understand what it takes to carry the weight of the Black name. Too cowardly to shoulder the responsibilities of a man. *Real men* don’t run away, Sirius– they stand their ground.”

Sirius took a step backwards and opened his mouth in order to retaliate, but then they were startled by a stumbling noise. The three of them yanked their heads towards the drawing room’s door opening, where another stumbling sound marked the entrance of Father – who was, measured by his staggering, completely hammered.

Regulus winced at the bad, *bad* timing. Really, it was as if the universe was plotting against him.

“Ah, a *real man*, you say?” Sirius said, a shrill laugh leaving his mouth. He ran his eyes over their father in disgust and spread his arms in a dramatic gesture welcoming Father’s entrance in the drawing room. “A *real man*, ladies and gentlemen!” He then jerked his head back to Mother’s gaze. “Are you sure your coldhearted bitterness doesn’t just come from your husband, Mother? It must be unbearable, having such a lousy husband whose sole talent seems to be locating the nearest blond he can push his small prick in!”

They all gasped.

Regulus was no novelty to Sirius’s foul mouth, especially when it came to his relatives and their ways of life, but this made his mouth drop open in complete and utter shock. Sirius too looked taken aback, like he had surprised even himself with his words.

In a split second, Father had grabbed him by the collar, pushed him against the wall next to Regulus and clutched his hand around his neck. In a swift move, Regulus grabbed his wand sticking out of his pocket and hid it under a cushion on the sofa, afraid what kind of hex would come out of his father’s mouth now he was completely plastered.

And indeed, Father searched through his pocket with his free hand immediately looking for the stick that’d give his son a good going-over. He swore loudly when he couldn’t find it and then tightened his grip around Sirius’s neck and dragged him out of the drawing room up to the stairs. Now, Sirius was no young boy anymore and had grown into a strong, Beater build so Regulus was sure that he could overpower his drunk father if he really tried – but perhaps he felt, deep down, that he deserved what was coming for him. Still – it didn’t

stop him from screaming, cursing and kicking in opposition as they made their way towards the stairs.

“Let go of me, you drunk fool!”

“I’ll teach you a lesson, son – think you’re wise, don’t you? The courageous Gryffindor? I will show you how soon you break when I get my hands on you!”

The sounds gradually died out while they violently climbed the stairs, and eventually the door snapped shut and a *Quietus* left the whole of 12 Grimmauld Place in complete and deafening silence.

*****

The next day it was unusually quiet at Grimmauld Place. Everyone would stay out of each other’s way and barely recognise each other’s existence – to such an extent that, when Mother ordered Sirius and Regulus to get dressed and ready for the ball, Regulus realised they were the first words spoken in the house the entire day.

Father hadn’t let Sirius get off easy – he had a black eye, part of his face was swollen and badly bruised, and he walked like he was in pain. Mother ordered Kreacher to patch him up – she was obviously concerned about the gossip mill that would rotate in unparalleled speed if Sirius were to show up at the Annual Ball with a face showing he was clearly beaten up like a dirty Muggle.

Regulus dreaded the Ball for the obvious reasons – too many people, too much drinking, too much dancing and too much tension from Mother over her eldest son’s behaviour. He tried to gauge the level of rebellion still left in Sirius and concluded there wasn’t much based on his perpetuating silence and empty eyes. Apparently Father had literally beaten the senses out of him. It wasn’t surprising, though – Regulus wouldn’t even dare to *think* what Sirius had confidently thrown into the faces of his parents like it was nothing.

Eventually, they all gathered by the Fireplace, looking like the perfect pureblood family. Mother looked ravishing and powerful, wearing an opulent gown with an intricate silver embroidered star motif. The high collar, long, fitted sleeves and cinched waist emphasised her sharp features. Over her black velvet and silvery gown, she wore a long, trailing cape. Naturally, her appearance was topped off by the family crest pendant around her neck and the rings engraved with the Black family motto – as if, without them, one might forget that they were dealing with Walburga Black. Father also wore his most

expensive and perfectly tailored wizarding robes. He wore dragon-hide gloves and his dragon-hide boots were polished to shine. The Brothers Black were impeccably dressed too – they both wore formal robes, although Sirius's were a dark silver and Regulus's a deep emerald. Much to Sirius's disdain, they were embroidered with the Black family crest along the hem and cuffs. Looking at his brother – the flawless embodiment of the Heir with his perfect curls, high cheekbones and subtle stubbles across his cheeks – Regulus was once again confronted by the irony of Sirius, literally and figuratively being born to be the Black Heir, defying the duties bestowed upon him by birth.

They waited for Mother to approve of their appearances while Father circled the Firewhiskey in his glass, boredom etched on his face. A stern gaze by Mother made him put the glass down on the mantelpiece. He nodded, grabbed some Floo powder and disappeared through the Fireplace. Sirius, being the firstborn, was supposed to be next, so he reluctantly trudged towards the fireplace, then halted for a second, snatched Father's drink and downed it in an instant.

"Santé," he said, tossing Mother a rebellious and vicious wink before going through the Fireplace as well.

Regulus went next, grabbed some glittery powder and stuck his elbows to his side while he saw numerous fireplaces pass by in front of his eyes until he arrived at Deadmore Keep.

*****

Much to Regulus's surprise, Sirius did more or less behave at the Ball – the reason for which would be clarified several days later.

Once Regulus exited the fireplace, he realised they were, as per etiquette, 'fashionably late'. It was only custom for close relatives to arrive by Flooing – the rest would arrive at the wrought-iron gate through apparition, portkey or any other means of transport.

The Grand Hall that housed the multiple fireplaces was made to impress the guests; the walls were barely visible due to the amount of portraits that looked over the spectacle with interest. Now, for the occasion, tall, enchanted Christmas trees stood at each corner of the room, adorned with glowing ornaments flickering like distant stars. Regulus was immediately met by the lively sounds of greeting, laughing and whispering people, the sounds of Thestral hooves outside and the soft enchanted choir humming Christmas carols from

the mezzanine above.

Before Regulus could take in the sight of aristocratic splendour, he was cornered by a House Elf very eager to take their coats, and then–

"Oh, *there* you are!" said the enthusiastic voice of Aunt Druella. She, like Mother, wore a long gown, although hers was a dark shade of purple. "Now, you look simply *exquisite*," she continued, beaming at the four of them and steering them to the Drawing Room which was turned into a reception area. House Elves in their uniforms hurried through the crowd, serving Enchanted Champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Regulus quickly escaped the weird small-talk between Mother and his aunt, and glanced at the crowd looking for familiar faces.

He recognised most of them, of course, being forced to attend these balls from an early age. It was attended by the crème de la crème. He recognised the Flints – two sons and a daughter and their several kids, having all finished Hogwarts already except for the youngest who was a third-year Slyrherin. He also saw the Selwyns – Sabrina and Sylas looking equally bored. There was Abraxas Malfoy talking with Yaxley next to the Lestrange brothers. The Greengrasses were there – Amaryllis and her younger brother, too young to attend Hogwarts anytime soon. He saw some Parkinsons and Travers, and the Carrow twins with their parents and aunt. Truly all of them were there – but he was missing the most important people, his friends… And then he spotted the Notts at the far left of the room. Isa, with her coral, satin gown, her golden hair in a perfect updo and a collier carrying a pink sapphire around her neck, looked nothing short of magical.

Regulus quickly crossed the room to greet his best friend – after exchanging pleasantries with her parents, of course, for it would be considered rude otherwise.

"Good evening, Mrs. Nott," he said, then turning to Isa's father. "And Mr. Nott."

It was no miracle that Isa had turned out beautiful with the handsome parents she had. Mrs. Nott was an elegant woman with golden locks similar to Isa's. Her features were complemented by delicate cheekbones and piercing blue eyes that made the deep, crimson colour of her gown stand out even more. Mr. Nott was a man in his fifties and was widely considered very handsome with salt-and-pepper hair, square jaw and broad shoulders. The deep, rich colours of his wizarding robes provided him an even more imposing stature and he had the air of someone that wielded power. It was the twinkling eyes,

though – the same, warm brown eyes as Isa's – that betrayed that he had a mischievous, humorous side.

"Regulus," he said with a broad smile. He put his arm around his shoulder and patted him goodheartedly on the arm with his free hand. "Good to see you, lad. You're looking sharp tonight!"

Regulus smiled. "Oh, but my sharpness pales in comparison to you," he said, "and especially in comparison to you, Mrs. Nott."

Mr. Nott let out a loud bark of laughter and Mrs. Nott shook her head with a smile.

"Always the charmer, you, Regulus," she smiled.

He wasn't really charming normally, though, that was normally Sirius's forte – but he had known Isa's parents long enough to be comfortable with a bit of banter.

Isa rolled her eyes, albeit kindheartedly, and tucked her arm in his. "Don't go wooing my parents, now. So – have you seen any other of our lunatic friends?"

They looked over the place in unison, then spotting Evan's parents, clearly enjoying themselves as they laughed and chatted animatedly with Aunt Druella, Evan's mother's sister. Regulus had always liked Evan's parents. He was convinced that Evan's mother was the epitome of what a mother should be—kind, warm, genuinely caring and, most importantly, with an unconditional love for her son. Even Mrs. Nott, though warm and kind in her own way, had a slightly mean streak in the form of impossibly high expectations. But Evan's mother was everything that a mother should be. Evan's father was similarly commendable; in addition to his goodhearted nature, he also seemed to worship the ground his wife walked on. And sure, they were a bit too expressive in the love they held for each other, but in a world rife with infidelity, it actually felt like a refreshing exception. Just behind the loving couple was Evan, leaning against the wall with Barty and smugly looking around the room. They went over but unfortunately weren't able to get past the greeting stage, for then the start of the feast was announced, and they were all steered to the enlarged dining area.

Regulus always hated that there was a seating arrangement – seating families together, meaning that Regulus would always eat with his parents, brother and another small family or some random individuals that filled the remaining seats at the round table. This year was no

different, and he reluctantly settled down with Sirius on his one side, and an elderly couple on the other. The food itself was exquisite though – it truly was a magical meal, with enchanted soup that changed with every couple of spoons from pumpkin, to mushroom, to French onion and so on, with a roast enchanted swan served with a cranberry sauce that sparkled as if induced with stardust, magical pies changing with every bite and amuse-bouches floating through the air.

"Isadora 'just a friend' Nott is looking rather *ravishing* tonight," Sirius smirked matter-of-factly over a spoonful of soup, eyeing Isa a couple of tables away. She was seated with her parents and the Greengrasses. She was listening attentively to Amaryllis who, despite the difficult hairdo and exotic gown, truly had nothing on Isa's beauty.

"I guess she does," Regulus said stiffly, not really sure in which direction his brother was going and not very eager to find out, too.

Sirius snorted. "C'mon, you don't need to fancy her to, you know, admit that you'd–"

"I'd what?" Regulus asked with raised eyebrows, now officially not liking the course this conversation was taking.

"Look, we all know you're the 'classical type'–" Regulus, suddenly remembering that Lucius had said something similar not too long ago, interrupted his brother eagerly.

"Now, what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Well, you know – you wouldn't just be with a bird for the fun of it," he said cautiously as if internally debating the words he was to use, "you would… marry, stay with her, and her only, the rest of your lives…"

"Yes," Regulus said grumpily, "so? Monogamy is rather underrated these days." He shot a meaningful glance at their father.

"Yes, yes, it's a good thing!" Sirius chipped in quickly. "Really, it is – but that doesn't mean you can't appreciate what the eyes see, you know…"

"It's awfully starting to look like *you* fancy her, brother," Regulus said warily.

"Oh no," Sirius said with a smirk, "no, she's too … classic for me, brother."

“Classic?”

Sirius sighed, clearly exasperated that Regulus didn’t seem to understand the meaning behind his words instantly. It’d probably be different with Potter, Regulus thought wryly.

“Yes, a bit too… uptight and high maintenance,” he said, and when Regulus was about to retort something in Isa’s defence, he raised his hand indicating he wished to continue, “and *besides*, imagine the uproar – the eldest Nott with a ‘progressive nitwit’ like me?”

Regulus couldn’t suppress his snigger.

“But, still,” Sirius went on, trailing his eyes over Isa, “you’d either have to be the world’s biggest liar *or* the biggest poof if you said you haven’t once thought about doing her.”

Regulus, who was in the midst of a large bite of roasted langoustine tails, tried to swallow quickly to be able to retort, but Sirius was quicker. “Or, in your case,” he continued with a humorous smirk, “make sweet, passionate love to her for hours on end.”

Regulus choked in his food, coughing uncontrollably and his eyes tearing. Sirius clearly thought this was very funny as he roared in laughter and clapped Regulus on his back in hilarity.

*****

The rest of the evening was, to Regulus’s astonishment, quite alright. He had dreaded the prospect of having to mingle and ‘network’ with Merlin knows who, being forced into stiff ballroom dancing and putting out fires started by Sirius and Mother. This time, however, Sirius and Mother seemed to – wisely so – avoid getting within a radius of fifty yards of each other, of which Regulus made good use by instead staying close to his brother so he could, in turn, avoid being pushed into ‘networking’ by Mother. Mother’s partner in crime in this whole forced socialisation ordeal, Cissy, was too busy with her fiancé – which suited Regulus very well indeed.

Besides, he had a rather good time watching Evan and Barty trying to outdrink each other and making complete fools out of themselves, especially now they had something resembling girlfriends who they tried to impress.

Regulus had just grabbed a Butterbeer from the bar at the large hall adjacent to the ballroom and made his way past the magical

performance of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* by enchanted muppets that was watched by some children unfortunate enough to be dragged along by their parents. There were people that chose to keep their children at home – like the Notts that had left Isa's sisters to the devices of their House Elf, Sable – but other parents would take their offspring with them. Regulus and Sirius, too, had always been dragged along and Cissy, Bellatrix and their – then still to elope – sister, Andromeda, would be forced to watch over them – much to everyone's dismay.

As to be expected – but with a drunk Evan and Barty, you never *really* knew – Regulus's friends weren't among the children watching the performance, so Regulus continued his quest and passed the Duell Gallery where – as the name gave away – people would go to duel for fun. He slowed his pace to get a glimpse of a duel between Amaryllis's father and someone Regulus was sure worked at the Ministry – and then set foot inside the grand Ballroom.

It was a magnificent room with high, vaulted ceilings adorned with carvings of serpents and celestial constellations. The crystal chandeliers, from which snowflakes swirled to disappear just before touching the ground, cast a warm glow over the room. There were warm Christmas lights everywhere and random sprigs of mistletoe that everyone – except for Evan's parents – desperately tried to avoid. At the end of the room were the pillars separating the ballroom from the drawing room, which now functioned as a quieter area where people could socialise over a couple of drinks, participate in divination games and bicker about the latest Quidditch matches.

Naturally – it was a Ballroom after all – there was a small orchestra on an elevated platform providing live music, gently urging guests into the gleaming black marble dance floor. The room was crowded with many eager to display their finest waltzes and gavottes. Still, plenty of guests occupied the plush sofas and pouffes scattered around the edges, either taking a moment to rest before their next dance or simply enjoying the spectacle from afar. Drinks floated gracefully through the air, gently bobbing as if to tempt the guests, eager to be chosen and enjoyed.

Just when the orchestra finished the music accompanying the contredanse, Regulus spotted Barty, Evan, Amaryllis and Melania at a sofa. He groaned at the prospect of being the fifth wheel, but walked over anyway, since it'd be better than lingering around alone. Measured by Barty's loud barking laugh and frivolous swaying and Evan's still apparent sense of balance, it was Barty that was on the

losing side of their drinking competition.

Just before Regulus could join them, Barty grabbed Amaryllis's hand and dragged her to the dancefloor. The orchestra had started playing the upbeat to a waltz, and Regulus groaned at the idea of Barty making a complete idiot out of himself publicly.

"Evan?" Regulus asked his friend cautiously. "Does Barty know how to … dance?"

Evan, sensing the same prospect as Regulus but seeing nothing but hilarity in it, roared in laughter. " *No*, I don't think Crouch Sr. was a dancer."

Regulus figured – and as his dad was no dancer, Barty wouldn't be dragged to events including waltzes, mazurkas, gavottes and the like.

Regulus quickly stormed to the dancefloor and grabbed Barty by his collar – in extension also pulling Amaryllis back to the edges of the room.

"*No* , Barty," Regulus hissed, "no ballroom dancing for you - you can barely walk."

"Aaah, c'mon!" Barty roared in opposition. "Let me and the woman dance!"

Amaryllis giggled at the same time Regulus shuddered in disgust.

"Really, you'll be very grateful tomorrow," Regulus continued. "Go dance somewhere private–"

"Oeh, *private*," Barty said, "*that* I like. Let's go–"

And off they went, Barty pushing his way towards the drawing room with a giggling Amaryllis tugging behind.

When Regulus returned to Evan and Melania, he noticed Evan's tense and focused gaze on a couple on the dance floor, and then he realised that he'd clearly missed the moment when Sirius had miraculously enough managed to convince Isa to accompany him on the dance floor.

Regulus stood shoulder to shoulder with Evan, their gazes fixed.

"You want me to jinx him?" Evan offered.

Regulus considered this for a while and thought about Sirius's general enthusiasm about the idea of Isa and Regulus being somehow romantically involved, and the knowledge that Isa was somehow 'too classic' for his brother.

"No," he answered. "Let them dance."

And dance they did – Sirius was an excellent dancer, as was Isa, and they performed a flawless waltz. So flawless, even, that it wasn't just Regulus and Evan staring at the scene unfolding in front of them – there were several people scattered around the room that eyed the dance with impressed, contemplative or jealous looks.

One of these contemplative looks belonged to Cissy, who was on the other side of the room, absentmindedly listening to her brother-in-law, Rodolphus. Regulus hadn't seen that much of his favourite cousin, but he was positive that if she'd spotted him now, he would be forced to dance a waltz as well.

"Gotta go!" Regulus said quickly, and then skedaddled out of the room.

The downside of this was, however, that he was now back within the range of Mother's networking claws, so he tried to stay incognito while trying to find some modus of entertainment in the absence of any of his friends.

Just when he was sure he was safe when he entered the Drawing room and saw no Mother in sight, he heard the deep voice of his father. Regulus quickly jumped behind one of the pillars between the Ballroom and Drawing Room and realised that he *really* found himself in this situation too bloody often. Fucking pillars.

"–well, looking at the dancefloor, I am almost tempted to conclude that Sirius might have had… some change of heart," Regulus heard the voice of Aunt Druella say.

Regulus winced. *Of course* he couldn't just be forced to eavesdrop on a conversation about inflation rates or something.

"Hmm," Father offered as an answer, and Regulus recognised the disbelief in it. "I am not sure we can speak of a real *change of heart*."

"What do you mean?" Druella asked eagerly. "You think he's … too far gone?"

Father didn't answer, but Regulus had the inkling that he might have nodded.

"Then, what now?"

"Indeed," Father responded. "What now?"

"Well, there's Regulus…"

Regulus groaned internally. He really did *not* want to listen in on a conversation about himself between his impossibly to impress father and gossiping aunt.

"Yes, there is Regulus," Father said.

Regulus once again realised that his father was a terrible conversationalist.

"It's not really the same though, is it?" Druella continued cautiously.

Regulus winced and knew what she meant. Sirius was *destined* to be the heir. He often reminded him of Isa's father, for they were both charismatic, witty, popular… Regulus was very aware of his parents' preference for their eldest son, and he couldn't really blame them, either.

But then the conversation took an unexpected turn.

"Now, that is the consensus," Father said, and for once, Regulus witnessed his father actually weighing in on a conversation. The surprise about that would pale in comparison to what Father was about to say next, though. "But I don't get it. Regulus is brilliant, frankly. Top of his class in every subject, a remarkable Seeker, a brilliant political strategist and apparently a very decent dueller, too. So yes, Sirius has the charisma, but I believe that people tend to underestimate Regulus."

Regulus's jaw dropped to the floor in surprise. He was completely shocked. He was unaware that his father knew so many adjectives with a positive connotation, and was utterly dumbstruck by the fact that he used them in order to describe … him. A strange warm feeling spread through him.

"Well, perhaps," Druella said. She sounded doubtful, but it went completely past Regulus who was still in a state of combined shock and ecstasy over his Father's praise.

“And once he marries Isadora, the two most powerful wizarding families will be finally bound together.”

This brought Regulus back to his senses - *once he marries Isadora?*

They were talking about *marriage*? He was yet to turn fifteen, for fuck’s sake!

They expected him to *marry Isa*?

What?

*****

Completely taken off guard by this conversation, Regulus returned to the Ballroom and absentmindedly bumped into the Lestrange brothers.

“Oh,” Regulus said awkwardly, not quite meeting the brothers’ eyes. “Sorry – didn’t pay attention–”

“No worries,” Rodolphus said. “Hit the bottle a bit too hard, hah?”

Regulus, who hadn’t hit any bottle at all, chose to lie in the form of a stupid grin.

“Your girlfriend looks… nice,” Rabastan continued with a smirk. Regulus was well aware of the fact that he probably thought of quite a few other words than ‘nice’, of which none would be very befitting the belle of Isa.

“She does,” he said stiffly, not denying his relationship with Isa for a change.

Rodolphus whistled and was about to retort, when Regulus heard the voice of Sirius behind him. He sighed.

“You alright there, brother?” he asked tentatively.

Regulus knew quite some people that he did not particularly like – most of the people he came across, probably – and there were also some people that would be alright to handle in a certain setting, but would have Regulus give a wide berth in another. The combination of both Lestrange brothers and Sirius within the distance of twenty yards really did tempt Regulus to just give the slip.

And then, as if on cue, as if fate was truly messing with him, Yaxley and Dolohov appeared to the Lestranges’ sides.

“Of course he’s alright,” Rodolphus said with a sly smile. “We’re the best of pals, aren’t we, Reg?”

Regulus was very tempted to argue this statement, but he knew no good would come off it.

“Oh, you look surprised, Black,” Dolohov sniggered.

“That’d be appalled, actually,” Sirius corrected him. Regulus realised that Sirius had *clearly* been sorted right, holding his ground while confronted by this crowd.

“Are you coming, Regulus?” Yaxley continued. “We were just on our way to the Duell Gallery – can’t wait to see in person what tricks you have up your sleeves.”

Before Regulus could even think about whether he wanted to accompany them or not, he was practically pulled away from his brother by the guiding arms of Lestrange and Dolohov.

And although Regulus managed to shrug them off before being forced into a duel with anyone, he realised that, although the rendez-vous between the Slytherins and Sirius had been a very small, trivial event, it would greatly affect his elder brother with whom he had been on such friendly terms over the holidays so far.

*****

“Ah, *there* you are.”

Regulus yanked his head around and came face-to-face with the warm smile of Isa.

“Long time since we met here,” Isa continued. Regulus nodded.

It was true - the last time they met here, here being the hidden balcony terrace that one could enter through the entrance behind the velvet drapery in the ballroom, they had just started Hogwarts. Regulus, having spent much time at Dreadmoor Keep and being Sirius’s younger brother, was sure he knew nearly all hidden places the estate held, and this balcony terrace really was a hidden gem. It was quite large for a balcony, and from its edge, you could see the winding path going from the Entrance Hall to the estate’s gate on one side. On the other side, you could gaze over much of the manor’s property, with, all the way down, just the edge of the dense forest in sight.

“I’ve been looking for you for ages,” Isa rambled on. “And once I’d checked all the logical places twice – I suddenly remembered this place.” She took in the sight of the snow falling down on the cobblestones.

“I’ve casted a heating spell,” Regulus explained, taking in Isa’s confusion about the contrast between the snow and the pleasant climate on the balcony.

Isa nodded. “Of course you have. Now – help me out, will you? I can’t bloody *breathe*.” She closed the distance between them and turned her back to him.

Isa interlocked his questioning gaze over her shoulder. “The dress, Reg, zip it open, will you?”

Regulus jolted his hands in surprise and then got to the task, unzipping her dress slowly. He tried to control his fingers, but with the conversation with Sirius over dinner and the conversation between Father and Aunt Druella in his mind, it felt like this simple act was suddenly loaded with something he couldn’t really place. He felt a tension in the air that he really wished he was imagining and then decided to lighten the mood.

“You’re going to walk around with your back exposed, Nott?” he joked.

Isa laughed. “No, though … that’d be *brilliant*, but no. It takes a couple of layers to get my back exposed, you see–” she pointed at the corset that was now visible. “And believe me, there’s another two layers under this thing as well.”

“But– that’s torture,” Regulus said.

“Well, thank you!” Isa grinned. “It’s refreshing to get some recognition. Now, the next step would be to loosen the corset.”

Regulus internally cursed at his clumsiness with corsets – he theoretically knew how they worked and his best friends – Isa and Cissy – *were* female, but corsates were generally considered part of a woman’s lingerie and well, he hadn’t found himself in the situation of having to untie a corset’s laces. With trembling fingers, he untied the knot and gently pulled the laces outward.

“How far do you want them to go?” he asked softly.

“Well, I’d *want* them loose all the way, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to fit my dress anymore–” Regulus continued pulling the laces, ” –yes, this will do.”

He, now with rather well-trained fingers, tied the laces and softly zipped up the dress, though he accidentally brushed across her bare skin just above the zipper. He felt Isa shudder. She held his gaze over her shoulder, then turned around, while not dropping it.

You’d either have to be the world’s biggest liar or the biggest poof if you said you haven’t once thought about doing her.

Or, in your case, make sweet, passionate love to her for hours on end.

“Are you alright, Regulus?”

Isa’s voice snapped him back to reality, and he took a step backwards.

“Yes, of course,” he said quickly. “Sorry, just thinking about something.” He slowly walked towards the balcony’s edge, leaning on the balustrade and taking in the sight of the path leading to the gate.

All of a sudden, he saw Evan’s dad bursting through the grand double doors with Evan’s mother in tow, clutching his hand.

“C’mon, let’s go,” Mr. Rosier said mischievously.

“You’re sure they won’t notice? It’s the first time he’s invited a friend…”

Regulus interlocked gazes with Isa that had joined him, and realised that they were talking about leaving Evan and Barty behind.

“Positive – they’re too busy having fun with their friends… We’ll be back in a bit.”

Mrs. Rosier giggled. “Alright, but we can’t take too long, I don’t want Evan to worry…”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Rosier laughed cheerfully, hurriedly tugging his wife towards the gate while shooting secretive glances over the grounds. “Now, hurry up, tiger, and let me have my way with you.”

Regulus, who really had the reflexes of a Seeker, quickly clamped his hand on Isa’s mouth that would have otherwise let out a very uproarious laugh.

"Shhh," he hissed, stifling his own laugh. "They can't hear us."

Once they had gone through the gates, Regulus let go of Isa, who broke out in a fit of laughter immediately.

"Oh – that's just *weird*."

Regulus thought about the hilarious scene that had just played out in front of them and laughed along.

"'Tiger'," Isa mocked, "'let me have my way with you' – oh, bloody brilliant!"

They laughed for a while, and once it had died out, they both sighed and Isa had to wipe some tears off her cheeks.

"They're just *weird*," Isa sighed.

Regulus considered this for a while, and realised he didn't agree. "No," he said. "I don't think it's weird." He thought of their parents and all that took place behind closed doors and between unfaithful sheets. "I think it's exactly how it's supposed to be."

Isa looked taken aback by this at first, but then composed herself. "Perhaps you're right. Love should be celebrated."

Regulus nodded, not meeting her eyes. He didn't quite know what the conversation between his father and aunt meant and therefore had no idea whether and if so, how, to break it to his best friend.

"Sometimes I wonder," Isa continued. "If this is it."

"What do you mean?"

Regulus looked sideways at Isa, but now it was her turn to sternly look away. "Well," she continued in an oddly insecure fashion, "is this – is this what I'll be doing the rest of my life?"

Regulus had a very stunned expression on his voice once Isa had mustered the courage to look him into the eyes.

"Will I live from social event to social event? Busy my days with a Ball? Become 'the wife of' and nothing more?"

The sudden course of the conversation took Regulus by surprise. Never before had she voiced concerns like these. It gave him a very unsettling feeling.

“No,” he scoffed. “Of course not - you’re *Isadora Nott*, the wittiest witch to have ever attended Hogwarts – there’s nothing you can’t do, nowhere you couldn't go–”

Isa shot him a smile that was, oddly enough, both warm and wry. “That’s not true, Reg. Once they marry me off, and I’ll be really lucky to have a say in the matter–” Regulus shifted uncomfortably on his feet “–I’ll be degraded to ‘the wife of’ and nothing more. My sole purpose will be to bear children, keep my husband satisfied and to be half of the perfect couple to the outside world.”

“And what if you were to marry someone that would .. you that – you know, the room to be and do more than that?”

Isa eyed him sadly. “Fat chance. Meeting that person, that person hitting all the boxes that traditionalism prescribes *and* falling in love with him?”

Regulus nodded. “Yes, you can’t really control the last one, can you?”

“No,” Isa said. “And to have *that*—” she nodded at the gate through which Evan’s parents had just disappeared, “it is love that you’ll meet the most.”

They stood in silence, shoulder to shoulder, leaning over the balustrade, lost in their own thoughts. In the silence, the orchestra’s music grew louder. It was the upbeat to a slow, viennese waltz.

“Why can’t they ever have us dance the bloody salsa or tango,” Isa complained, and Regulus was too preoccupied with all the impressions the ball had left to dwell on this peculiar statement.

“Now, let’s forget about all this stupid stuff in the future,” Isa continued, “and waltz with me, Reg.”

And without opposition, he put his hand on her waist – and they danced.

Chapter 13: Of Blood & Brothers

Chapter Notes

> Not a fan of chapter notes and generally don't give out warnings, but I feel it's appropriate for this one. This is a relatively dark chapter, with graphic depictions of violence / blood etc.

Regulus hated the beach. He hated the sand stuck between his toes, the briny smell around the cliffs, the salty water, the sound of the water retreating, approaching, retreating, approaching…

So it was strange to find himself back at those familiar waters– the very ones that had made him loathe them in the first place– with that same, relentless rhythm of waves retreating, approaching, retreating, approaching…

Strange, too, was that he found himself deeply immersed *in* the waters, weighing thick and heavy, muting the world around him. It was dark here, too dark for his liking – deep beneath the surface, the sun barely made its way through the water's depths. He looked up, squirting through the wavering, liquid light that filtered down and realised that stranger even were the two chairs leaning on the surface of the water as if the ocean were solid beneath them, holding them afloat. They were attached but not alike - one grand and regal, its high back gleaming faintly in the shifting light, the other one smaller, plainer.

Regulus took in the sight once more and realised something was wrong - they were sinking, pulled deeper and deeper into the sea. With the water lapping at their legs, Regulus realised they were about to drown - a thought that struck him sharply, a pang of dread tightening in his chest. He had to do something, to move, to get them back above the water's surface. He propelled himself upwards through the heavy water, straining towards the chairs. The chairs were much further away than they first appeared - he pushed himself harder, his arms aching and lungs burning from the pressure. At last, he reached the smaller of the two chairs and grasped at it, but his hands slipped. He tried again, but it was no use - it was slick, impossible to hold onto. Panic started to master him, and he desperately went for the bigger chair. It'd be harder to bury the bigger chair's weight, but he had to do *something*. He reached for it, sure that it would be useless, and then - realised it was easier to grasp. It welcomed his touch, pulled him closer even, but before he could do anything at all, a bolt

of pure white light tore through the water like a crack in the ocean's dark surface. It was bright, too bright - it blinded him, distracting him from the chairs - he couldn't see, he would have to continue blindly, relying only on his sense of touch… and then, it grew softer, its brilliance calming.

Regulus opened his eyes and suddenly, it pierced the water, cutting through the dark ocean like a blade, and the water trembled, it looked like it would scatter like glass, and then - the water was gone. There was only air in his lungs and sand beneath his feet.

Regulus turned around, looking for the chairs and then noticed they were gone; the familiar beach stretched out before him, the water merely a memory as it lapped at his ankles. A sense of emptiness flooded him, like something had been taken from him. He glanced around once more, but a gust of wind forced him to turn back, whistling in his ears, eerie and ominous. In the wind, he heard a familiar voice, a whisper wrapping itself around him. *It is love that you'll need the most.*

And then, with a jolt, Regulus woke up.

*****

The dream left Regulus with an uneasy sensation the remainder of the day - shimmering under the surface, leaving him with a feeling he couldn't name somewhere in his body he couldn't place.

It wasn't strange, though – it had been a rather odd dream compared to the horrible but very predictable nightmares he usually had, *and* Regulus was sure that the lingering effects had much to do with the tension in his body over the meeting he was to attend that night.

He had received not a single instruction, no indication about what to expect. The only thing that Lucius had shared, was that he was expected at the house of Bellatrix and Rodolphus at nine. The location was probably also one of the reasons for Regulus's anxiety; although he was to attend a meeting with his allies, with like-minded people, the fact that it was hosted at his cousin's premises made it feel he was about to step behind enemy lines.

Another thing that didn't really help his case, was the fact that Sirius seemed to be following him around. Everywhere Regulus went, Sirius would follow– subtly at first, later in an outstandingly annoying plainness. Regulus was well aware that it was just his brother being bored to the bone and having to survive another five whole days at

Grimmauld Place, probably combined with the inability to know where to go with his big feelings regarding the encounter with the people at the Ball that would most probably attend tonight's meeting as well. Sirius really was an open book.

Regulus would've just written his brother's sudden attention off as a liability he'd have to reluctantly accept for a couple of days, were it not for the fact that his brother could not know anything about this night's meeting. Regulus and Sirius liked to pretend they didn't give a fig about each other to the outside world, but the deafening silence, the cold shoulders and the averted gazes outside Grimmauld Place were very much testament to the opposite. And if Sirius got wind of the crowd Regulus was to mingle with, he'd probably not let his brother go without a fight.

Regulus was even tempted to call in Mother's assistance in the matter in some way – for she and Father were aware of the meeting – but he then realised he could just pretend to go somewhere else where he wouldn't follow. Regulus, unlike Sirius, was allowed to visit friends, anyway.

So, when Regulus had put on his finest robes and was nervously fidgeting in front of the mirror – he was *very* aware of how small and insignificant he'd look compared to all the others – and Sirius had barged into the room uninvitedly and had asked him what all the 'gearing up' was for, he answered: "I'm meeting Isa."

Sirius raised his eyebrows in suspicion, eying the clock at the wall that showed it was a quarter to nine. "At this unholy hour?"

"What is possibly *unholy* about the time?"

Sirius shrugged. "Nott doesn't strike me as the girl receiving male visitors so close to midnight."

"It's *hours* before midnight," Regulus shot him, annoyed.

"Alright– so it's a date, then?"

This took Regulus a bit by surprise, but he decided to just go along with it.

"Maybe it is," he said with a mysterious flair.

Sirius sniggered and Regulus couldn't believe his luck when his brother exited the room to go to the bathroom - he almost jumped

down four flights of stairs, made his way to the fireplace in the Kitchen and quickly shouted '*Nocturne Hall!'* before his brother could tail him again, because well, the only downside to his plan was the fact that he had to literally shout the place he was actually planning on going over to.

In his hurry, he had no time to mentally prepare him for visiting Bellatrix's house, so the doomy ambiance of the great, shadowy entrance hall on the first floor caught him off guard. It had been some years since he'd last visited his cousin's house, and it was clear it hadn't really improved in the sphere-department throughout the years.

The walls were adorned with dark wood panelling and flickering sconces on the walls cast long, wavering shadows. The only sound was that coming from Regulus's shoes touching the ground with every step he took and the soft crackle of distant flames from the fireplace. Regulus shuddered and quickly walked over to the Meeting Room. He had never been there, but he knew it was right to the Drawing Room that was just across the Hall.

He was nervous - he had *no* idea what to expect, after all. The meeting in Hogsmeade would probably be child's play in comparison; just some teenagers from Hogwarts meeting with alumni over a couple of drinks in a public place. No, this was different – Regulus had felt it already when he was invited back in the Hospital Wing, and he felt it again; a weird mixture of anxiety and euphoric anticipation as he was to become part of something *big,* something that would eventually rewrite history. So, although he felt very discomfited by the unknown, he also felt strong and grateful to be part of something so big – to be *chosen* to be part of this. He would be at the heart of the revolution, among the earliest group of people to set in motion a change so groundbreaking, so fundamental…

Still, it was the anxiety that had the upper hand when Regulus clutched his hand around the door knob of the heavy, oak door that was the only thing still standing between him and the future revolution. His hand left a sweaty mark on the door knob and he was positive that anyone could hear his heart pounding out of his chest. Slowly, he creaked the door open, and was met by the sight of a small group of people at an oval table of dark wood.

"Welcome, Regulus," Lucius said, gesturing his arm towards one of the empty high-backed chairs.

“Thank you,” he answered and he cursed internally at the nervousness his voice betrayed.

He quickly made his way across the room, and settled down next to Dolohov, who was, after Regulus, the youngest among the crowd. Regulus subtly let his gaze trail over the rest of the attendees – naturally, Bellatrix was there, the only woman among men, looking delighted and positively delirious, tapping her wand on the desk happily and proudly occupying the chair next to Lucius, who was apparently leading today’s meeting. On his cousin’s side, there was her husband, Rodolphus, and his brother, Rabastan. On the other side of Lucius, Yaxley was sitting back in the chair as much as it allowed, and next to him were two other people – they looked like Lucius’s age, or perhaps some years his senior.

“I don’t think you have met,” Lucius commented, apparently aware of Regulus’s gaze. “Regulus, meet Thorfinn Rowle and Corvinus Travers – Thorfinn and Corvinus – Regulus Black.”

They all nodded in meeting, and Regulus tried to shake off the feeling that he was rather standing out by his age – Dolohov would be three or four years older, and these were essentially the years that turned a boy into a man; so, in the end, he was the only schoolboy among a group of rather influential and probably very accomplished men.

“So,” Bellatrix said impatiently, tapping her wand at the desk again in some form of impatience, “when is He coming? We’ve waited long enough – I want to serve him, to show him what loyalty looks like.”

Regulus sat up straight immediately – so they were going to meet him; the man that would lead the revolution, who would be at the helm of historic change. The conflicting feelings of euphoria and anxiety spiked again in his body.

“Quite right, Lucius,” Travers said. “We’ve proven ourselves to be loyal.”

Lucius looked over the group with a calm smile. Regulus understood why Cissy was about to marry him. He looked composed, especially next to a frantic Bellatrix, and the way he took in the gazes of the people around him, the way he seemed to tower over them very subtly – it exerted power; combined with the kindness in his acts and words, it was a natural, pleasant and just power that he radiated. He slowly steered his head to his left. “You will meet him when it’s time, Bellatrix, Corvinus – he is … preoccupied. Expanding his reach. The

time will come, soon, but not tonight."

Bellatrix looked overtly disgruntled by this. "Expanding his reach where? Aren't we supposed to be his inner circle?" she snapped.

Lucius answered with a sternness that Regulus hadn't witnessed before by many people, and that fitted his role as leader very well. "He is building alliances abroad, Bella. Gathering strength. His influence is spreading – he's laying groundwork that even you can't comprehend. But we, here in Britain, have a task. He has entrusted us – me– with securing our own territory and recruiting loyal, capable followers. *That's* where our focus should be."

Bellatrix's husband joined in. "And how are we to do that? I don't suppose we're meant to walk around spouting his name – especially with Minchum's new course."

Lucius retorted sharply, and Regulus practically felt an eye-roll in his words. "Of course not. Subtlety is key. We must be careful whom we approach. He values strength and cunning, not reckless enthusiasm. We are to find those who can contribute — both in power and influence. Competence matters."

"We've already taken most of the strong families, haven't we?" Travers commented. "Purebloods, at least. It's not like we're going to be recruiting Mudbloods."

Rowle and Travers snorted.

"Pureblood status is important," Lucius said, his voice cool and measured. "But capability is essential. We need people who are skilled – and yes, of the right bloodline. He does not tolerate weakness. We need people from different places, different ages."

Regulus tried to suppress the heat rising to his face when all eyes turned toward him.

"Well, we've already gotten our claws into the younger ones, obviously," Travers said with a sly grin.

Lucius shot him a sharp glance. "Regulus has proven his loyalty *and* his potential time and again."

Bellatrix leaned back in her chair, a twisted smile forming on her lips. "Oh, we're all so proud of dear Regulus, aren't we? Little cousin's finally playing with the grown-ups."

Her mocking and rather condescending tone made Regulus feel very uncomfortable, and once again Regulus was reminded why he liked Lucius, for he, again, came to his rescue.

“Now, Bella,” Lucius said smoothly, his voice calm but with a hint of amusement, “I seem to recall you weren’t much older when you first fancied yourself a real player in the game. Let’s not be too quick to forget.”

Yaxley sniggered and winked at Regulus, who was very eager for the conversation to take a turn into a different direction – which, luckily, it did.

“What is the plan, then?” Yaxley asked. ”Do we recruit directly, or watch them first? Gauge their loyalty?”

“We observe first. Approach carefully, through connections we trust. Only those with influence should be brought into the fold. We do not need eager children who think they can join for the thrill of it. Those who have proven themselves will be invited, and only then, on my recommendation.”

“So, we’re just quietly gathering an army, then – waiting for the moment we strike,” Rodolphus said.

Lucius nodded. “When He gives the signal, yes. For now, we’re building. Each of us has a role to play. Recruit carefully. Act quietly. And above all – discretion.”

Regulus felt a little bit out of place, for he was clearly the recruité and not the recruiter and his lack of use was underscored by the topic Lucius addressed next. “Now, for the Ministry - we remain quiet, but–”

Before he could finish his sentence about their modus operandi regarding the Ministry, however, the door to the room flew open with force, and Regulus felt a surge of dread and disbelief seize him.

Fucking *idiot*.

Regulus blinked once, twice, hoping his eyes were deceiving him. But no, they, very unfortunately, weren’t.

In the doorway, wand raised and clearly seething, was none other than his brother.

Regulus winced.

Only the world's truest, biggest idiot would storm into a meeting with Lucius, the Lestranges, Yaxley and – most importantly – Bellatrix. It was nothing short of a death sentence, a suicide mission.

Bellatrix's laugh echoed through the room — high-pitched and frenzied. "Oh, look who we have here! My other dear cousin."

Sirius glared around at the gathering, his voice dripping with disdain. "What is this? The Death Eater recruitment fair?"

Regulus wasn't sure whether to feel exasperated at his brother's stupid recklessness or impressed by the sheer nerve it took for Sirius to keep his voice steady in front of this particular crow.

Lucius, ever the politician, stepped forward, calm and composed. "Sirius, what a surprise. You've arrived just in time. Why don't you join us? You may find our discussions… enlightening." His tone was smooth, as though he thought there was still some chance to sway Sirius — a futile attempt, Regulus was very aware.

Before Sirius could respond, Narcissa entered the room quietly, her eyes darting to Regulus. His pleading gaze met hers, silently begging for her intervention.

Sirius, not missing a beat, turned his fury on the entire room. "You're all a bunch of delusional idiots. Worshipping a lunatic cause that is going to get you all killed."

Bellatrix's eyes gleamed with dangerous excitement. "Oh, cousin, how little you understand… But you will. Soon." Her voice was low and taunting in a clear attempt to provoke – something she did with an unmatched eagerness.

Sirius scoffed, turning to Bellatrix. "I understand perfectly. You're all sick. And you — Bellatrix — you're the worst of them. I always knew you'd lose it one day. With your vile–"

Bellatrix silenced him mid-sentence with a flick of her wand, binding him in place. Her expression turned cold as she stalked toward him, her voice dripping with venom. "Do you think this is a game, Sirius? Do you really think you can stand there and mock us?" She leaned in closer, her face inches from his. "So, tell me, will you finally declare yourself against the Revolution? Will you officially distance yourself from the side that will claim victory?"

Sirius, eyes blazing with defiance, managed to choke out, “Yes.”

A twisted smile spread across Bellatrix’s face, making Regulus’s hair stand on end. She looked ready to exact some form of brutal, torturous punishment. And, knowing his cousin, she’d have some nasty tricks up her sleeves. “*Oh* , I’m going to enjoy this.”

Before Bellatrix could act, however, Narcissa stepped between them, her face pale and tense. She glanced at Regulus, reading the desperation in his eyes, and turned to her sister. “Bella, stop. Leave him to his mother. She’ll deal with him as she sees fit.” Her voice was strained, but firm, laced with fear of what her sister might do.

There was a pause — Bellatrix’s eyes flickered with something wild before she lowered her wand, reluctantly stepping back.

Narcissa took Sirius by the arm, her face expressionless. The room was deathly silent as she led him out, leaving a tension so thick it was suffocating.

An awkward silence hung in the air until Lucius spoke up, his voice cutting through it. “Regulus,” he said softly, a knowing look in his eyes, “perhaps you should ensure your brother gets what he deserves. We wouldn’t want him making more trouble. I will fill you in about the rest of the meeting later.”

Regulus hesitated for a moment, then quickly nodded, eager for an escape from the tense and embarrassing atmosphere. He walked to the fireplace at a quick pace and quickly flooed his way to Grimmauld Place.

*****

Once he stepped out of the fireplace in the kitchen, he almost bumped into Narcissa who was on her way out.

“I left them in the drawing room,” she said hurriedly. “I was just getting back – or, do you want me to stay?”

Regulus, not looking forward to the prospect of Cissy witnessing Mother’s worst side – she had seen some through the years, but tonight she would probably turn particularly nasty – shook his head. “No, I’ll try and look… what I can do.”

She nodded, shot him a warm but nervous smile, and then stepped into the green flames.

Regulus slowly climbed the stairs to the first floor's landing, the voices of Mother and Sirius growing louder with each step. Or wait – he realised that it was only Mother that did the speaking. Sirius, probably trembling to the core at the thought of what Mother might do, was unnervingly silent.

"YOU TRAITOR!" she shrieked, her voice breaking with fury. "YOU FILTHY BLOOD TRAITOR! HOW DARE YOU STAND IN THIS HOUSE! IN *MY* HOUSE!"

The entire house seemed to tremble with the weight of her rage. Regulus, creeping the door open just enough to peer through, quickly realised Sirius wasn't silent out of fear – no, he was silent out of *pain*.

Sirius lay sprawled on his stomach on the hard wooden floor, fists clenched, his eyes squeezed shut in sheer agony. Regulus's heart froze at the sight of a pool of blood slowly spreading beneath his brother's body, soaking into the floorboards.

"I GAVE YOU EVERYTHING! YOU WERE THE HEIR, THE FUTURE OF THIS FAMILY! AND YOU'VE THROWN IT AWAY – FOR *WHAT*?" Her voice cracked, high-pitched and hysterical.

Regulus had never seen his mother like this—her hair dishevelled, her eyes wide and crazed, almost bulging from their sockets, her hands shaking violently as though possessed by the dark magic she was hurling through the air. She seemed completely consumed by madness.

"FOR WHAT? MUDBLOODS? HALF-BREEDS? FILTH?"

With a vicious flick of her wand, a jagged, whip-like strand of dark magic slashed through the air, striking Sirius squarely on the back.

Sirius gasped in agony, his body jerking with the impact as fresh blood sprayed across the floor. Regulus's stomach turned at the sound of Sirius's muffled groan, the sound of his body breaking under their mother's fury.

"AND TO DISGRACE YOUR FAMILY LIKE THAT – YOUR OWN *BROTHER* LIKE THAT!" she ranted, her eyes wild with fury, barely even seeing Sirius anymore. "YOU ARE NO SON OF MINE! YOU NEVER WERE! YOU'VE CURSED THIS FAMILY – DISGRACED US!"

Again, she raised her wand, and again, it lashed down on Sirius, leaving him convulsing in silent pain. Regulus felt completely numb,

frozen in place, unable to move. He stood there, transfixed by the horrifying scene, as his brother bled out in front of him, his mother lost in her psychotic delusions. He stood completely, utterly nailed and frozen to the ground.

"WHAT HAVE I DONE? WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS?" Mother continued, her voice creaking under the strain. "YOU'VE TARNISHED CENTURIES OF PURE BLOOD!"

Another lash. Then another.

WHAM! The sound echoed in the room. *FLASH!*

The blows kept coming, and each strike sent more blood spilling onto the floor. It seemed endless, like a nightmare that wouldn't stop. Regulus wanted to look away, but he couldn't. He wanted to move, but he was unable to.

"MY SON, THE HEIR, BETRAYING ME, DESTROYING ME, FOR SOME MUDBLOODS!"

Another strike. The room filled with the sickening sound of flesh tearing and blood splattering.

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, Mother's arm lowered. Her hands trembled violently from the exertion, her breath coming in ragged gasps. She looked more like a hollow shell than a person, eyes empty and glazed.

Suddenly, Regulus seemed to wake up in the middle of this sick nightmare, and realised he had to do something. Life was leaving his brother right in front of him – he had to do *something*, one more lash could mean the end of him…

"You are no son of mine," she hissed. Regulus stared at her, his heart pounding in his chest, seeing the depth of her madness. "I am going to get your Father."

As she turned to leave, Regulus darted back around the corner, heart thudding in his ears. He waited until he heard the sound of her footsteps descending the stairs. She would probably Floocall Father, it would only take a couple of minutes – maybe less. He had to move swiftly, quickly. He tiptoed back to where Sirius lay, his body limp and nearly lifeless. Blood was everywhere, pooling around him. Regulus hesitated for just a second, then reached out, grabbing his brother by the shoulder and shaking him, his hands trembling with

panic.

“Sirius?” he hissed in panic. “Sirius!” He shook him harder, but Sirius remained unresponsive, his body heavy and cold. “*Sirius*!”

Fuck. Panic surged through him. He glanced around frantically, helplessly, his mind racing, and then his eyes landed on the fireplace – The Floo.

He didn’t have much time. Mother could be back any minute. He had to get Sirius out of here—somewhere safe. Somewhere their mother couldn’t reach them.

And then it hit him. *Yes*, that was the only way out… the only place his brother could go to, where they could patch him up, yes… But how to get there?

Regulus, very aware of any possibility starting to get futile by the seconds because he had so little time, cursed. He knew the address – he had sent the books for Muggle Studies to the address, after all… But, would it be connected to the Floo Network? Would there be protective enchantments? There’d better be, Regulus thought quickly, seeing their vocal blood traitor stance, but oh, how he begged that they hadn’t… How he begged they’d be dumb and not have closed off the Floo network. It’d be Sirius’s only way out – oh, *please*, *please*.

He dragged Sirius toward the fireplace, leaving a slick trail of blood behind them. His heart raced as he fumbled with the Floo powder, his hands shaking so badly he almost dropped it.

Please, let this work.

He tossed the powder into the fire, hoping —praying— that they hadn’t closed off their Floo connection. He took a deep breath, grabbing onto Sirius as tightly as he could, and threw them both into the flames.

They spun through the network, tumbling through fireplace after fireplace, until finally, they landed. Regulus staggered forward, his knees buckling as he stepped out into the dimly lit entrance hall of a grand, but cosy, house. The beige carpet beneath his feet turned red as Sirius’s blood soaked into the floor.

Regulus looked down at his brother, his heart pounding. Sirius was barely breathing, his robes torn and stained with blood, black lash marks criss crossing his skin. But they had made it… They had made

it…

The silence in the Hall stood in stark contrast to the pounding of Regulus's heart and his ragged breathing.

"Hello!?" he screamed, the panic dripping from his voice.

What if they weren't there? That'd be bloody terrific – after the one in a million chance of being able to Floo to this house, and then having Sirius bleed out because the inhabitants were on a holiday or something.

"SOMEONE!?" Regulus roared.

And then, he heard the soft, muffled sound of feet getting down the grand stairs in the Entrance Hall.

Regulus took in a deep breath and looked up, never in his entire existence having been so fucking happy to see *James Potter*.

James Potter who, nailed to one of the stairs' last steps, looked at him in complete, utter shock. Regulus couldn't really blame him, though – it wasn't every day that Regulus ended up in Potter's fireplace.

Potter's eyes slowly darted to Sirius's lifeless body.

Or that he came carrying the bleeding corpse of his best friend, of course.

Potter clearly needed a long time to process all the conflicting and questioning information penetrating his brain, for he hadn't moved an inch, the blood had drained from his face, and his mouth was agape.

"Potter," Regulus said. "Is there anyone home?"

No reaction.

"Potter – I need to know, is there anyone home?"

Deafening silence.

"POTTER!" Regulus roared urgently. "Get your mind back here, Potter! I need you!"

This seemed to do the trick, for with a jolt, Potter seemed to be awake and panically sped towards the bleeding body of Sirius.

“What the *fuck* , Black?” he asked, his voice trembling and laced in complete shock. “What happened? What did they do to him? What – *what*–”

“No time to panic, Potter,” Regulus said, but his voice was high-pitched and trembling, very much betraying that he himself was panicking to the very last bone in his body. “Is there anyone home?”

“My parents,” Potter replied, investigating the wounds at Sirius’s back and gently wiping the bloodstained hairs away from his face. He took in a deep breath, probably about to shout one of them over, but Regulus quickly clasped his hand over Potter’s mouth and silenced him.

“*No one* can know that I was here,” he said. He retracted his hand, but Potter remained silent, shooting Regulus a look that showed a strange mix of blind panic and complete incomprehension.

“Do not,” Regulus continued, “under *any* circumstances, let anybody know that it was I who brought him here, okay?” Silence, again.

“Potter – *do you understand*?”

Potter nodded.

“Okay, now, is there *any* chance your parents know some Healing – or is there any Healer that they trust–”

“That they trust?” Potter interrupted him. “Surely we’re taking him to St. Mungo’s.”

Regulus’s eyes grew in panic. “You can’t, Potter,” he said, grabbing Potter by his shoulders, taking in his brown spectacled eyes and shooting him a pleading gaze. “You can’t. They – they might find him there.”

“You think they’ll kill him?”

“I don’t know,” Regulus said earnestly. “Better to play it safe, now it’s all … fresh.”

Potter nodded. “Mum’s best friend is a Healer, she’ll know what to do. But these wounds – they…”

“They’re magical lashes,” Regulus explained quickly, feeling that they were running out of time. “She used black magic to–”

“She?” Potter asked, puzzled. Regulus didn’t understand his expression – and then saw Potter’s eyes grow once he’d connected the dots. “*Your mother* did this?” he asked, clearly appalled.

Regulus rose from Sirius’s body and turned to the Fireplace. “Remember, Potter, *do don’t breathe word* about me being here, not even to him–” he gestured towards Sirius’s body, completely still and defeated on the bloodstained carpet “–the lashes won’t heal quickly due to the dark magic, she’ll have to magically staunch them…”

“You can’t go back there,” Potter said. He rose from Sirius’s body as well, and clutched Regulus’s arm. “You can’t go back to her.”

Regulus, startled at Potter’s warm touch after feeling the cold of his brother’s body, looked at Potter’s hand and then slowly tilted his head to take in Potter’s brown, worried eyes.

“I’ll have to, Potter,” he said with a wry smile. “I am the spare.”

*****

When Regulus returned through the fireplace, he was met by an unnerving silence. The kitchen was empty – which was a fortunate thing, as it lended him the possibility to clean himself up with his wand without prying eyes. It’d be difficult to claim he had nothing to do with Sirius’s mysterious disappearance with his brother’s blood all over him, obviously.

He sighed – what a fucking mess. Sure, the possibility of Sirius breaking with them had always been at the back of his head. Regulus always hoped it’d be but a rebellious phase; his brother, after all, had always liked to provoke, to prod calm waters and to rub things the wrong way. But things had grown more serious over the years, and seeing him there, wand raised, foolishly confronting a large group of opponents, it’d become clear for Regulus that Sirius might actually be willing to sacrifice his life for it.

And now, after tonight, there was no way back. He knew his brother would never return. He had felt it lingering in the air for weeks and he now realised that his brother’s hovering during the holidays, the cheerful games of chess, the words of advice – it all had been a way of him saying goodbye. Every laugh, every gesture one step closer to stepping away for good.

Regulus tried to swallow the lump in his throat as he slowly ascended the stairs to the floor holding his bedroom. He was just about to step

inside his bedroom – he was so bloody tired and Merlin knew what time it was – when he heard a disgruntling sound in the bedroom next to his – Sirius's.

Slowly, he pushed the door open, and was stunned to see Mother in the middle of the room. She had her wand violently pointed at the Gryffindor posters that his brother had plastered across the walls just to enrage her. She was clearly immersed in another round of attempts to get them off, although every sane person would realise it was futile – a permanent sticking charm was, after all, *permanent*.

The chaos of the room mirrored Mother's gaze. Drawers hung open, content half-spilled onto the floor – clothes, books, broken quills, crumpled parchment, all scattered across the room in a chaotic jumble. The bed was a wreck with twisted sheets that were tossed aside, and the nightstand had been upended. It looked like a battlefield.

Still, it was nothing compared to his mother – her face twisted with fury, eyes wide and bloodshot, hair wild and dishevelled as though she hadn't slept in days. Her lips moved, although Regulus heard no sound, and her chest heaved with every breath she took.

Regulus was unsure what to do – his mother was clearly in some kind of episode. The way she had been gone after Sirius… it was as if she was possessed. And her eyes now– they were *empty*, completely void of any emotion. It made a chill run down Regulus's spine. He had no clue what to do, what could mend her in this state.

So he slowly entered the room, approaching Mother like a hunting animal afraid to scare off its prey. The creaking sound of the floorboard snapped Mother's attention to the door opening, and the sight of her – her expression, it made Regulus jump back in surprise. There was a hatred in her eyes that was unfathomable – it surely was impossible to convey that much loathing with such small eyes…

"*You*," she hissed, her wand pointed at Regulus's chest.

Regulus winced at the realisation that Mother clearly knew that he'd helped Sirius escape. *Fuck*.

"*You*," she replied, her wand now pressing his chest. Although she was smaller than him, he felt her towering over him, crushing him under the weight of her fury. He shrunk, fear and shame swallowing him whole.

And then, before he could even think, before he could open his mouth to offer some kind of explanation or apology or anything - it hit him.

Bone-crushing, excruciating pain.

It knocked the wind out of his lungs, set his skin aflame and drove knives deep into his bones.

He couldn't breathe – oh Merlin, he couldn't breathe – and then *Flash!* Another wave hit. And before he could recover from the pain and gasp for air, he felt it again – *whip!*

The world began to blur and darken, he could see nothing but stars flashing in front of his eyes and *oh* , the pain, it was unbearable – he was surely going to die – this was it, the end, he couldn't take it anymore – and *whip! – No, Mother, please, stop* – and *whip!* – he felt the blood seep through his robes, a warm wetness spreading over his body that was growing colder by the second – and *whip! – " You thought you could come back?"* – and *flash!* – it burned, it burned his skin, surely he was ablaze – *"You think you can betray me? You think you're above me, Sirius?"* – and *flash*! – he felt the hard, cold floor, wet from his blood – no, *Mother,* it's *me,* it's *Regulus!*, no not another one, *no* , please – and *flash*! – please, spare me, I'll take his place, I'll carry the family name, I'll do anything – *please* make it stop, I am *begging* you, on my knees, no, not another one – and *whip*! – and then, the faint voice of someone else – *please, save me – "Aunt Walburga!"* – please, *spare* me – *"Regulus!"*

And then all went black.

*****

His body was stiff, hard even, and heavy – like a large rock was weighing down on him, pushing him all the way down, down, into darkness. His skin felt strange, like it wasn't his – raw, like rubber. And then he felt it – a heartbeat. *His* heartbeat – he had a heart, a chest in which it beat, a body – a head, heavy and painful, but housing his senses, his thoughts… he was still here… Where was here? Why did it feel like the earth was pulling him down, sucking him in?

Then, suddenly, with a painful surge, the memories came back to him. Sirius. Blood. Mother. Her eyes… So much hatred…

He groaned.

Regulus carefully opened his eyes, and was thankful for the dark state of the room he was in – he slowly let his eyes trail over its walls and realised he was in his bedroom. Light creaked through the curtains, so apparently it wasn't night – but the curtains had been drawn on purpose, and before he could think about Mother and what else might befall him, what else she might do – he saw a familiar bunch of blonde locks resting on the end of his bed.

Cissy.

Regulus groaned again, trying to move his legs, but he couldn't move an inch. The deep sounds in his throat, however, did awake his cousin from whatever state she was in.

"Reg!" she said, snapping her face up. Her eyes were puffy and showed that she was completely knackered. "Oh, Reg, I was so worried…"

There was no way to describe the sensation Regulus felt in his chest at the sight of his cousin almost breaking out in tears.

Cissy softly stroked his cheek, blinking the tears from her eyes.

"Wh - what - what–"

"Shh," she shushed, "don't talk. We've managed to patch you up, but you'll need some time to heal properly…"

"Where is–"

"Your Mother clearly had an … episode," Cissy started carefully. "They had a Healer come over from St. Mungo's – sedated her, calmed her… She's been bedridden for four days."

Regulus let out a sound of shock at the realisation that four days had passed – something that cost him dearly, as the sensation of pain shooting through his body was beyond measure.

"Yes," Cissy said sadly, aware of Regulus's thoughts, "they took you out for three days on purpose – the Healers – and then we just… waited."

Regulus nodded and thought of Sirius. Surely Potter knew what he was doing and had gotten him some proper Healers – right?

Again, Cissy seemed to read his mind.

“He’s had it rough,” she commented. “But he’s out of the woods, or so I have heard.”

Regulus shot her a puzzled look.

“Isa has been in contact with … them. Better to keep it to yourself, though,” she said quickly.

Regulus nodded.

“I’ll notify the Healers that you’re awake–” Regulus somehow managed to grab her wrist, and shook his head slowly. “Oh, not now? Later?” Regulus nodded. “Okay, sure, Reg. Later.”

*****

A little while later – he frankly had no clue, it could have been minutes or weeks – Regulus awoke at the sound of his bedroom door creaking open. He started to muster all the physical strength still left in his body to open his eyes to get to know who had joined him in his room, when the feeling of a hand softly grabbing his hand answered the question for him. He hadn’t felt that hand for years, not in this gentle, soft way – he had been convinced even, that perhaps it hadn’t been real at all. But this, this soft, warm, hand, reminded him – reminded him that it hadn’t been a dream, not an illusion, but merely a distant memory.

“Regulus,” came her voice, soft and unsteady.

Regulus finally opened his eyes and carefully moved his head to the left, taking in the sight of someone so familiar who he, somehow, barely recognised.

“Mum.”

She looked surprised at her son being awake and responsive, and for a split second, Regulus was sure that she’d return to her cold self, when her stunned face softened, and she gently enclosed his hands within her own, wrapping them in a tight, protective hold.

“Oh, Regulus,” her voice cracked. She leaned forward, her head now resting against her hands that were still clutching onto his hands. “You’re still here.” Her voice was laced with relief and sadness. She looked so vulnerable, so *human* that it made him well up.

His voice broke. “Mum.”

And then, when she stroked his hair, so tenderly, so full of love, he cracked and let the tears roll. “Mum,” he repeated, his voice hoarse and barely audible.

“You’re still here,” she said, rocking her back and forth against his hand. “Don’t leave me, Regulus. Don’t leave me like he did.”

And then, something happened that made Regulus question all that existed – the shock waving over him in sadness and love and relief.

His mother cried.

Tears streamed down her face, her shoulders shook lightly, her eyes were closed, she clung onto his hands like it was her dearest possession, afraid to let it go and lose it forever, and she kissed it – kissed his hands, her lips warm and full of a love that Regulus didn’t know existed, and oh, how it filled his heart…

No matter what had happened before, no matter what would happen after, it was this – this was how Regulus would choose to remember his mother for the rest of his life.

Chapter 14: Of Whispers & Smirks

It had taken days for Regulus to get back into a state in which he could at least pretend to the outside world that nothing had happened – sure, he'd move a tad too stiffly, he would groan in pain when he bended in certain angles and it still felt like he was lugging along a gigantic rock, but it would only be spotted by an observant bystander. He had been bedridden for a week now, and it was frankly starting to bore Regulus out of his mind. He had had nothing more than his books and the occasional visit from Cissy to entertain him, so he was absolutely thrilled to finally get back to Hogwarts.

The downside of it all, though, was that Hogwarts had already started three days ago and that Regulus would have to Floo to Slughorn's office to get there - it'd be so much more convenient if he had just boarded that train. Regulus Black not showing up at Hogwarts for days and Sirius Black being off the rails– because they ought to know that something had happened with him in some way or another– would have the gossip mill working overtime. Still, it was either that and being able to pretend all was right, or boarding the train with blood still seeping through the bandages. He'd chosen the former - and it would give him a little bit more time to mentally prepare himself for facing his brother again.

Still, despite the fact that he was aware he would probably draw some attention to himself, nothing could have prepared him for the stares, whispers and thick silence that met him when he entered the Great Hall. It was dinner time and he was starving– but he realised he could've better opted for the Kitchens instead.

Because once Regulus set foot in the Hall and the first students had noticed his presence, it was a matter of second before he felt nearly every set of eyes on him. Some students nudged their friends to draw their attention to his entrance as well, and apart from some whispers and a couple of oblivious first-years all the way in the back, the Hall had fallen eerily silent.

Regulus froze temporarily – he could still return, get to the Kitchens and have dinner there… The staring made him *really, really* uncomfortable. But then again, going back now would make him look weak, as though he cared about what a few gawking Hufflepuffs thought. No, he'd better make his way to the table with his head held high. Regulus sighed – *of course* the Slytherin table couldn't just be the

nearest to the door. No, he had to walk the entire length of the Hall, past Merlin knows how many students before reaching his destination and being able to turn his back to his fellow students.

So, he decided to move swiftly and walked to the left pretending to not give a fig about the staring eyes he came across, ignoring the '*what happened to him*'s and the *'did they really disown his brother, you think?'*s.

He quickly took in the sight of the Slytherin table, suppressing the sensation of panic as he scanned for his friends, and sighed in relief when he saw a little wave by Isa's hand. She was seated next to Amaryllis and Melania, with Barty, Evan, Snape and Avery across from them. In a welcoming gesture, Evan quickly shuffled over, ordered a third year to hand over an empty plate and motioned for Regulus to sit down between him and Snape. He was happy to only face the stares from his friends now that his back was turned to the rest of the Hall, and quietly piled some food onto his plate.

It was Isa who eventually broke the silence. "So– Amaryllis, please *do* tell me more about the two snogging oldies you ran into at the Ball…"

Amaryllis, catching the hint, immediately launched into an animated retelling of how she'd caught two elderly guests getting at it behind a pillar at Dreadmoor Keep.

Barty and Evan, completely immersed in the story, howled with laughter at the details, and Isa managed to dutifully gasp and snigger at the right times while her eyes kept flickering over to Regulus with quiet concern.

"Good holidays?" Severus asked, clearly feeling a bit awkward by the weird situation he was pulled into.

"Terrific," Regulus said dryly. "You?"

"Yeah, me too."

Regulus nodded and ate dinner in silence, the majority of the conversations and banter around him sliding past him. His friends had clearly understood Isa's message to pretend nothing was out of the ordinary, and so they did. Still, Regulus longed for some peace – a quieter place, soft preferably, as putting students at these hard benches without any back support was positively a crime. Unfortunately, though, he could hardly get out of the Hall on his own

without becoming part of some kind of circus, so he was forced to sit it out until his friends were finished eating. But he was so bloody tired, and his back was killing him…

"Well, you lads finally done eating?" Isa shot Barty and Evan, who were still in the midst of stuffing some puddings into their mouths.

"No Nott," Barty shot her irritatedly. "There's still some éclairs left–"

Isa, taking in the sight of his hungry friends with much irritation, violently grabbed the plate of éclairs and stuffed the remaining three in her mouth in what could be considered an impressive, record-setting speed.

Evan and Barty stared at her in shock.

"Look at that! Not anymore there aren't, Crouch," Isa said, dabbing the corners of her eyes with a napkin. "Now, let's get back to the Dungeons."

Regulus shot her a grateful look as they all stood and left for the common room. Although it didn't turn as deafeningly silent as it had when he entered the Hall, conversations seemed to die out suddenly at their passage, and Regulus was glad that Isa and Evan had volunteered to serve as some kind of buffer between him and the others, shielding him from sight.

Once they were out of the Hall, Regulus realised he had started at the Hall's doors all the time in an attempt to ignore his fellow students – and two of them in particular. Amaryllis and Melania continued their endless chatter about Merlin knows what while they descended the stairs toward the Dungeons. Isa hooked her arm in his and Regulus pretended very hard that the painful sensation of her elbow grazing his side subtly didn't almost kill him. Isa seemed to sense it, though, for she shot him a puzzled look that he chose to ignore, clenching his teeth and continuing their way.

Regulus had had some rough days – his body still needed time to heal and now that the pain potions, creams and the like were slowly moving out of his daily routine, he was left to his demons at night again. This, together with the miserable atmosphere at Grimmauld Place and the isolation from his friends had made the Christmas Holidays rather unpleasant. So now that he was among his friends in the common room – laughing and cheering, a warm feeling of gratitude spread over him - Barty and Evan chasing each other with a levitated book, Amaryllis and Melania cheering them on and sending a

levitating roll of parchment after them that tried to slap them on their heads, Isa – lovely, sweet Isa, clapping her hands and shooting Regulus a warm smile…

It was good to be back.

His friends knew, apparently through Evan's Mum, that Sirius was officially disowned, and probably thought he had some extra days to settle things at home before returning to Hogwarts. Regulus didn't know whether Evan and Barty were actually this gullible or just didn't feel like prying – but it suited him either way.

Isa, however, well, that girl was a whole other story.

"Reg," she said after a while, her face set with determination, "I need to return some books to the library. Care to join me? I'm sure you need to pick up a few after such a long break."

Regulus shot her a wary look, but knew that there was no way out of Isa's determination. He'd be cornered by her one way or another - better have it over with.

They made their way out of the common room and once they had climbed the stairs out of the Dungeons, Regulus realised that Isa's hands were empty.

"Don't you have books to return?" he asked dryly, shooting her empty hands a meaningful look.

Isa rolled her eyes. "You know that was all a pretext. Now – there should be a classroom here…"

In the end, they ended up in the familiar Charms classroom that they normally used for the ASS-meetings. The pouffes there were marvellous after all, especially now the amount of comfortable positions to sit in was rather limited.

"So," Isa said, clearly not eager to beat about the bush, "how are you?"

Regulus grinned at the forced pleasantry of the question. "Brilliant, Nott."

Isa rolled her eyes. "Care to share what's happened over the holidays?"

Regulus wasn't an idiot, so he knew that he couldn't avoid the questions forever – he hadn't had contact with anyone since the meeting at Bellatrix, and hadn't seen any of his friends since the Ball. The only contact with the outside world had been with Cissy – hardly to consider 'the outside world' seeing her discretion and closeness to the family – and, indirectly, through Cissy, with Isa.

However, he was not supposed to disclose anything relating to the meeting at Nocturne Hall and he wasn't particularly eager about disclosing anything relating to Mother's breakdown, or whatever it had been, either. So, now, in front of Isa, he came to realise that it didn't leave him with much.

"I – I… I don't know where to start," he said earnestly. His brain was too foggy from the lack of sleep, stress, the simmering feelings of the nightmares, the smell of his brother's blood, his burning back…

"Well, I wrote to Cissy — but your cousin isn't really the tattletale, now is she?" she said with a disgruntled expression on her face.

Regulus sniggered.

"Potter, however — well, he breaks easily."

Regulus looked at her, confused – how did she know about Potter's involvement in this?

"Apparently," she continued,"your dear brother barged into some kind of meeting and then *something* happened and he ended up at the Potters bleeding to death. Now – the bloke wouldn't disclose anything about what or who got him in that state–"

And as if on cue, the door to the classroom opened and Isa and Regulus jerked their heads to the entrance – met by the sight of no one other than James bloody Potter.

He was wearing Muggle clothes– a turtleneck and jeans – which looked surprisingly good on him, and his shocked eyes probably mirrored those of Isa and Regulus. Regulus shuddered at the memory of the last time he looked into those bespectacled eyes.

"Did you bloody summon the bloke?" Regulus shot Isa dryly.

Isa looked rather panicked. "No, of course not– what's happening?"

"Nott," Potter nodded in greeting, after which he slowly turned his

head to Regulus, “Black.”

“Potter,” they responded in unison.

“You alright, Black?”

“Dandy.”

Potter snorted. “Sure. Care to explain how you ended up at my place with your brother bleeding to death?”

Isa shot Regulus a gaze that could easily be translated into something like ‘*yes, what he says, please*’.

“I thought I was very clear on the secrecy part of that information,” Regulus shot him irritatedly.

“Well, your girlfriend isn’t an idiot *and* very vicious in her interrogation techniques.”

“Not my girlfriend–”

“Not my boyfriend–”

“Yeah, sure,” Potter shot them dryly. “Now– back to my question please.” He walked into the classroom with a confidence that Regulus would’ve admired if it hadn’t come from bloody Potter. He closed the door with a flick of his wand and settled down on an armchair across from them.

“I am in no way obliged to answer your questions, Potter,” Regulus shot him.

Potter seemed to consider this for a second. “No, you’re not.”

“Besides, hasn’t my brother given you the full account already?” Regulus continued, annoyance dripping from his voice.

It was the first time a crack appeared in Potter’s harness of confidence. He shot Isa a nervous look. “No. I just know that he wanted to disrupt some kind of meeting–”

“You’ve got to be bloody kidding me,” Regulus shot him. “You *knew* and didn’t stop him?”

“How was I supposed to stop him?” Potter defended himself in a high-pitched voice. “He notified me about five seconds before he walked

through that door."

Isa looked at them very confused.

"Two-way mirror," Regulus and Potter said, surprisingly, in unison, although the former grudgingly and the latter with a stupid sense of pride.

Isa nodded. "Aha."

"Back to the heart of the matter– so he barged into some kind of meeting, tried to disrupt the thing and then got to see the best of your mother?"

"What?" Isa said. "Your *mother*?" She looked appalled.

This conversation was turning too personal too soon, so Regulus jumped off from his pouffe and started to pace the room in an attempt to feel less exposed.

"I still don't get how you–" he turned to Isa "–knew to contact Cissy."

Isa sighed. "Well, I was actually sleeping–"

"Oh, did I wake you from your beauty sleep, princess?" Potter shot her sarcastically.

Isa ignored him. "–and then his stupid owl showed up at my window. I mean – *really*, that animal is stubborn."

"Yeah," Potter said proudly. "Elagabalus gets that way."

Regulus jerked his face to him in shock. "Your owl's name is *Elagabalus*?"

Potter arched his eyebrows. "Yes, so?"

"Like – after the Roman Emperor?"

"Eh, yes, obviously."

A very bizarre situation took place in which Regulus had to process the fact that he and Potter shared a *very* strange thing, while also having to accept that this similarity couldn't just be a private, secret thing that he could ignore – seeing Isa obviously knew that Regulus's owl was also named after a Roman emperor. She looked at the two of them with an expression very much betraying how hilarious she found

this particular piece of information.

Another thing that Regulus had to process was the actual choice for Emperor made by Potter.

“Potter,” Regulus said in a low voice, “of all options out there – all emperors – you chose *Elagabalus*?”

“Yeah, I liked his name, it’s strange.”

“Yeah,” Regulus nodded slowly, “there’s a reason for that.”

“Well, I don’t know that much about him, actually–”

“Obviously,” Regulus nodded, thinking about all the scandalous stuff he’d read about the emperor.

“Back to the matter at hand,” Isa chipped in. “His bloody Elagawhatever owl almost attacked me–”

“Yes, *that* was indeed the most horrible part of the evening,” Potter said dryly.

“–and carried a letter saying that your brother had miraculously managed to Floo his way to Potter while bleeding to death. Obviously, Potter had no clue what happened, but he did know about some kind of meeting.”

“And how did you end up contacting Cissy?”

“Well, I didn’t know what had happened, so I thought it better to play safe and owl Cissy in case your mail was checked or something.”

“Which is, apparently, a completely normal thing to do,” Potter stressed sarcastically, giving Regulus the idea that they had somehow discussed this matter before.

“But somehow, it took Cissy *two days* to answer,” Isa continued, looking very frustrated at the memory. “And then she was all cryptic and well, all of a sudden, apparently there was something going on with *you* – but she wasn’t giving me anything.” Isa looked at both boys in complete seriousness. “Really, I think the Cruciatus wouldn’t even break the woman – honestly.”

“Anyway,” Potter continued the story, “then you didn’t show up at Hogwarts– and well…”

“That leaves the question – what happened to *you*,” Isa concluded.

“Are you two conspiring against me?” Regulus shot the rather surprising team dryly.

Isa scoffed. “Are you kidding? Me – conspiring with *him?* ” She turned her head to Potter, and then quickly added: “Don’t take offence.”

“Yeah,” Potter shot her sarcastically as Isa’s tone sounded, frankly, very offensive, “I don’t really know how not to.”

“Look – nothing happened,” Regulus tried, as he was not eager about disclosing anything, especially to Potter. “It was just a very hectic … time and then I got the flu and–”

Potter let out a bark of laughter. “The flu?”

“Yes, Potter, the flu,” Regulus said, his eyes shooting daggers at him.

“Well, all the whispers, all the gossip, and here he is,” Potter said with a wide, sarcastic grin, “freshly recovered from the *flu*.” He let out another laugh, and then patted Regulus cheerfully on the back – which was, for Regulus, far from a cheerful event seeing his back was still covered in straight wounds that felt like they were ablaze at every touch.

He jumped away and winced and realised the damage was done before he could compose himself.

Potter’s grin turned into a mouth-drop instantly as the blood drained from his face.

“She got you too?” he asked with a low voice, closing the distance between them once again.

The genuine concern in Potter’s brown eyes did something with Regulus’s gut that he couldn’t put his finger on. “She put her wand on you too?” He looked appalled, nauseous even. Regulus could understand to some extent – the sight of Sirius bleeding to death had been rather appalling and Regulus was sure that Potter’s mother was all lovely, warm and motherly – only the bloody cosy Entrance Hall to the Potters’ estate revealed as much.

“Look, Potter,” Regulus started eventually in a small voice. He had no sense of Isa’s presence at all, for Potter’s question and expression was loaded with so much that it filled the room to an almost suffocating

level, leaving no space for anything or anyone else. “It’s none of your business. *He* is, though, now – and you’ve clearly managed to patch him up–”

“She has no right,” Potter interrupted him, “to do that to anyone – to her own sons–”

“That’s not for you to decide, Potter,” Regulus shot him in a very cold tone. Who did Potter think he was anyway? This was really none of his business – he had no idea how this world worked. Regulus knew his type; living in a fantasy in which everything was lovey-dovey and sweet and nice. The bloke had clearly yet to wake up and get a sense of reality and how things worked in the real world.

Potter took a small step backwards.

Then, the door flew open once again. The three of them jerked their heads towards the figure in the door opening – one very similar to Regulus.

“Sirius.”

He looked cold, distant. The way he looked at Regulus made him feel like he was transparent – looking at him, but through him, past him.

It remained silent for a while – a while too long, for Regulus’s liking, but he had no clue what to say or to do, so alas.

“Let’s go, James,” Sirius said eventually, ignoring the rest of the room entirely. “Moony will be done patrolling and we need to, you know–”

Potter nodded. Sirius turned on his heels and disappeared, leaving Regulus with a very uneasy feeling. Potter grazed past him on his way out, but before he was out of reach, Regulus grabbed his arm.

“Remember, Potter,” he whispered, referring to his promise back in Potter Manor. “Not a word.”

Potter looked at him confused, but nodded anyway and went out of sight.

Regulus sighed and suddenly realised that Isa was still in the room. She looked at him, her expression full of contemplation, biting her lip.

“So, they have recruited you?” was her sharp observation.

Regulus met her gaze. “Does that surprise you?”

Isa gave her head a small shake. “No, it’s your destiny to join them after all.”

“It’s yours too, Nott.”

“Oh no,” she said with a wry smile. “No matter how big the political influence I could yield or the fierce a duel I could fight – I am to become a trophy wife to a revolutionary and nothing more.”

She didn’t turn her gaze away from his, her brown eyes piercing, making its way through the depths of his soul. “And I think they already have a revolutionary in mind.”

Regulus swallowed, as the memory from the conversation between Father and Aunt Druella during the Christmas Ball resurfaced.

“And once he marries Isadora, the two most powerful wizarding families will be finally bound together.”

“So — you know.”

She snorted subtly. “Well – although Mum was always rather fond of your brother as you know, she was positively delighted to hear that he’d be officially disowned.”

Regulus arched his eyebrows.

“I mean – Mum, ecstatic by the fact that Regulus Black becomes the heir, it can only mean one thing, right?”

Once again, Regulus was impressed by her sharp-wittedness.

Regulus gave her a small nod.

“Let’s get back to the common room,” she sighed. She hooked her arm in his again as they walked down the third floor corridor. “You look tired.”

Regulus nodded. “Yeah, knackered.”

“You have something for … those?” she shot Regulus’s back a discrete look.

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “Alright. I brewed you some dreamless sleep potion over the holidays. Perhaps it’s better to stick to one per week for now — with all the other stuff you’ve undoubtedly taken.”

“Thanks, Ies.”

“Anytime, Reg.”

*****

New Law Grants Wizengamot Veto Power Over Healer and Gringotts Applications

By Althea Harkwood, Senior Correspondent

In a significant step aimed at reinforcing the integrity of key magical sectors, Minister Harold Minchum’s administration has passed a new law granting the Wizengamot the authority to veto any application for employment as a Healer or at Gringotts. This new measure reflects Minchum's ongoing commitment to ensuring that only the most qualified and trustworthy individuals are placed in these critical positions.

The law is the latest in a series of sweeping reforms under Minchum's strong leadership, part of his broader vision to secure the wizarding world against potential risks from within. Supporters believe the policy will help protect the magical community by providing a higher level of scrutiny over vital institutions such as St. Mungo’s and Gringotts, both of which are essential to the well-being and financial security of wizards across Britain.

With the Minchum administration’s focus on stability and vigilance, this new law reinforces his firm stance on maintaining order and safety during challenging times.

“Interesting, don’t you think?”

Regulus jerked his head from the Daily Prophet and saw Severus settling down next to him. He held the same edition of the Prophet under his arm and probably also hadn’t had time to read it due to classes that day.

Regulus nodded. “Yeah – it is.”

“Why do you think it’s been so … silent on the other side?” Severus continued.

Regulus was a bit taken aback by the fact that Severus wanted to talk

politics with him – apart from the occasional question about big events from Evan and Barty, the only one slightly interested in what fascinated him so much was Isa.

Apparently Regulus's face betrayed his train of thought, as Severus excused himself immediately. "Sorry – it's just, well, nothing has really happened over the holidays and… no one really cares." His eyes darted to Mulciber and Avery some tables away.

Regulus shook. "No, sorry – you just surprised me. Also around me, nearly no one cares."

"So what do you think is happening… or going to happen?"

Regulus thought about this. He could hardly tell Severus about his last meeting with what Severus had just dubbed the 'other side', and besides – if he could, he hardly had anything to tell for he was drawn off early. Still, he had eagerly read every edition of the Daily Prophet once he had regained consciousness over the holidays, and, indeed, there had been no coverage of any attacks or other activities from their side whatsoever.

"I think they're lying low," Regulus eventually concluded. "Regrouping. Minchum has been recently installed, and he's tough…"

Severus nodded. "Yes, all these reforms…"

"It's clever, don't you think?" Regulus pondered out loud. "Interfering with the application process of two of the most important institutions to the wizarding world…"

"I get Gringotts," Severus said. "Money. But why St. Mungo's?"

Regulus smiled wryly and thought of the recent personal experience he had that very much underscored the importance of access to St. Mungo's.

"If – or when, actually – it comes to war… St. Mungo's is worth more than any Galleon held in Gringotts. Imagine the power we'd have if we had unlimited access to all of St. Mungo's – its supplies, the Healers and their knowledge… No, it's a darn wise move from Minchum. It makes infiltrating St Mungo's, already a tough job, almost impossible…"

"Yes," Severus nodded. "You're right."

Regulus let his eyes trail over the boy next to him – sleek, black hair, crooked nose and so much about his appearance that gave away where he came from – or rather, from where he absolutely did not.

"Would you join?" he decided to ask. It was a bold move, but well, he *was* part of Thorne's group and he was intelligent; way more than his friends, anyway.

"Join?" Severus asked, confused.

"Would you join the revolutionaries? Or the Death Eaters, as they're called these days."

Severus looked around, as if he expected some progressive idiot to be eavesdropping on their conversation. Then he nodded, firmly. "Yes, I would."

Regulus nodded. "Noted."

"So – you're in? You know people?"

"Me?" Regulus said, as innocently as possible. "What would they want with a fourth-year?"

Severus eyed him suspiciously.

"But when the time comes, I will join, yes," Regulus continued.

Their conversation was cut off by the arrival of Barty, Evan, Mulciber and Avery. They laughed and joked amicably, and it took Regulus a while to grasp they were talking about an upcoming party.

"So – you've taken care of the booze, the girls will take care of the decorations and all," Barty said.

"Aah, it's going to be *grand*," Avery smirked. "Just need to win – or well, we don't even, a pity party will work as well…"

Regulus looked up. "Win?"

Barty sighed and rolled his eyes. "And they say you're intelligent – victory party, after the match?"

"Oh," Regulus said, realising they were talking about the Quidditch match to take place next weekend.

"So," Mulciber drawled, smirking at the sight of Melania and

Amaryllis whispering and giggling across the common room. “You guys … planning to seal the deal after the party?”

Regulus tensed. Was he talking about –

Barty smirked. “Well, you never know… a few drinks might, you know … loosen her up a bit.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows, feeling that Amaryllis hardly needed any loosening up. The blokes shifted their attention to Evan.

He tossed them a wink. “Same here – I’m sure Melania wouldn’t mind sneaking off for some privacy at the party.”

The boys all laughed and whistled, barring Regulus and – surprisingly – Severus.

Sure, Regulus knew this would happen at some point – the couples were all over each other all the time, so it wasn’t exactly shocking they would take it up a notch at some point… But something about it bothered him. Especially Evan – he had the best example any couple could set, and still here he was, casually discussing the chances of shagging his girlfriend after a couple of drinks. He couldn’t properly put it in words, or thoughts even, but there was something fundamentally wrong about it. The reduction of something so sacred to something so profane. He was painfully aware he was an oddball in this regard, though, so he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Just got to catch the snitch, Black,” Mulciber grinned. “To get the ladies in the right mood, and all…”

Regulus shot them a weak smile, since this hit rather close to home. It was Friday evening, and in a little bit over a week, the match against Ravenclaw would take place. Since he had just arrived and they had Fridays off, he had yet to touch his broom, but he knew it’d be a complete disaster. He could hardly stand the fabric of his clothes against his skin, so he could only imagine how it’d be to mount a broomstick…

“Yeah, sure,” he answered anyway. “Sure I will.”

*****

Next noon, Regulus was, indeed, forced to eat his words. With much effort he had managed to put on his Quidditch kit, and he somehow miraculously managed to clench his way through flying around the

pitch, but compared to his usual skill, his flying was a catastrophe.

It was so bad, even, that Vanity called him out for it publicly. This wasn't an unusual thing to happen to the other players, who were very much in the centre of the game, but to stand out as a *Seeker* during a simple training, well – that was bad news.

"BLACK! What's up with you?" Vanity roared from afar. She leaned forward on her broom and quickly flew her way towards him. "What's up with you? You're flying like a first-year!"

Regulus, feeling the heat rise in his cheek, mumbled some excuses and continued his laps around the pitch. It would've been better if he hadn't, though, for he suddenly realised that the stands were all but empty.

Of course, it was a Saturday afternoon, cold but sunny and rather beautiful, *and* the weekend prior to the match. Of course there'd be players from other Houses, taking in the team's latest tactics in an attempt to adapt their upcoming strategy – as was the case for the Ravenclaw players in the stands – or to maximise chances of winning bets – as was the case for the large group of Gryffindor occupying the stands. Regulus let out a groan when he realised that Potter was among them as well. The best bloody Chaser that had walked the Castle for years, and here Regulus was – making a fool of himself flying like a first-year Mudblood.

Regulus had hoped the January cold would somehow numb his back, but the opposite was true – the longer he flew, the worse his condition grew and the more disastrous his flying became. Vanity had called him out a few more times, once even in front of bloody Potter, and the Ravenclaws were whistling and doubling in laughter the entire training.

Already before Vanity called off the training, he had descended to the grounds, painfully jumped off his broom and made his way towards the Castle. In no way was he going to hear more of Vanity's swearing and reprimanding in the changing rooms, and in no way was he going to shower there.

He barged into the common room, ignoring Barty and Even in the corner, and locked himself up in the bathroom. Slowly he took off his kit, taking a long time with his jersey. He winced at the sensation of the fabric brazing his maimed skin, and nearly screamed when a splash of water touched his back in the shower.

He was in such a foul mood that once he had returned into the common room freshly showered, he decided to ignore his friends and not join them for dinner – opting for the Kitchens instead. It'd be better anyway, for he'd chosen to wear a sweater rather than his robes, for the latter was heavier and therefore more painful to wear. It was a weekend now and they weren't in class, so it wasn't strange for him to not wear his robes, but it was rather frowned upon to not wear robes during dinner. Well – for him anyway, it was only the pureblood aristocracy subjected to these unwritten rules. The majority of the school didn't seem to care.

Still, not even the excellent food from the Kitchens, nor the éclairs that sadly reminded him of Isa that he had barely seen since his return to Hogwarts, could get him into a good mood. It'd be a bad timing to be sucked into another conversation about his friends' plans following the Quidditch party, so he decided not to return to the common room for a while. He thought about going to the library – but then realised all his books and quills were still in the dormitory, and he didn't really feel like being surrounded by people in the first place. The idea of running into any of the Ravenclaws or Gryffindors that had just witnessed him flying from the stands… He shuddered and instead chose to get some room to think, somewhere comfortable but quiet… The Charm's classroom – yes, the pouffes and sofas were brilliant, and it well, it functioned as their ASS-headquarters, so it wouldn't be that weird to go there…

He was relieved the classroom was empty – although it shouldn't have surprised him, seeing it was just after dinner time on a Saturday evening so literally no one had reason to be there – and he sat down on a sofa – too enthusiastically though, as he misinterpreted the distance to the fanny and fell backwards against the sofa's back. He cursed loudly, then suddenly dropped his wand which rolled under the sofa. Regulus groaned, raised from his seat and got on his knees in search of his wand, when he suddenly bumped into the coffeetable on the right – and *fuck* this fuckery fuck day was fucking messing with him.

"FUCK!" he roared, grabbing his wand from the floor and, in a spur of anger, throwing it at the floor again. "FUCK!" He settled down and dropped his head in his hands.

"Well, aren't you having a splendid day."

Regulus winced and let out a groan, his face still in his hands.

“Bad time to mock me, Potter,” Regulus shot him.

“Ah,” he heard Potter’s voice, “but I didn’t come to mock you.”

Regulus heard his tread of footsteps getting closer and looked up. He had picked up Regulus’s wand and held it out. Regulus slowly took it from him and followed the sight of Potter settling down across from him.

“You’ve got to do something about the flying,” he continued.

Regulus, feeling the shame of the practice washing over him, cringed. “Ha, ha, you don’t say,” he shot him sarcastically.

“Oh no,” Potter said earnestly, “I don’t mean it like that – I just mean… what if you would do something about your back?”

Regulus raised his eyebrows, having no clue where this conversation was going.

“Are you using something for it right now?” he continued.

Regulus felt torn between giving in to Potter’s closeness and pushing the bloke far, far away. Still, he was the only of two people in the castle other than himself that knew his back was literally torturing him, so he decided to just go with it.

“Yeah,” he croaked eventually. “Numbing cream.”

“The plain one?”

Regulus nodded. “Yes, the strong one–”

“Would probably damage your nerves.”

Regulus looked at him in surprise. “You’re well-informed.”

It was true - he could only use the plain numbing cream; the heavy cream that would probably actually work, would damage his nerves if used regularly. The Healer at Grimmauld Place had explained that it was because the wounds were initially open wounds and not closed, and they were to inflict pain, leaving the senses of the nerves magically open. Tempering with heavy cream could irrevocably damage the nerves, so he’d have to do with the weak, barely effective stuff.

“You could try once,” Potter offered. “Regular use would definitely do

some damage, but just once – a little bit, just to numb it for a couple of hours…"

Really, bloody Potter did not cease to amaze.

"Why do you care?" Regulus asked.

"Well," Potter said, "your reserve Seeker is worse than the way *you* played today, so…"

"Again," Regulus drawled, "why do you care? Wouldn't want Baiss to find you've come to the aid of the Slytherin Seeker now, do you?"

Potter rolled his eyes in annoyance. "We're going to destroy you anyway – and well, can't make winning the Cup too easy this year… If Ravenclaw wipes you off the pitch, well, you'd be making it too easy for us… "

Regulus sniggered. "That's not true."

Potter shrugged and shot Regulus a serious look. "No it isn't. But it'd be easier for you to stick to that, right?"

Now it was Regulus's turn to shoot a contemplative gaze. "Perhaps. It doesn't matter though — I have no such cream."

"You couldn't ask anyone – your cousin?" Potter offered.

Regulus snorted – the thought of Regulus asking Cissy for numbing cream so he could play a Quidditch match made him cringe even harder than the memory of that afternoon's training session. No, the idea of Lucius hearing that Regulus had been complaining about the pain, after having been bedridden for a week, even delaying his return to Hogwarts by a few days… The idea was simply unbearable.

"No, I couldn't."

"Madame Pomfrey?"

This suggestion actually made Regulus laugh – darkly, but laugh out loud. Showing the matron the atrocity committed to his back, *no bloody way*.

"Stupid suggestion," Potter filled in himself. "And well, she won't be too eager about you experimenting with medicine in the first place…"

Regulus shuddered at the memory of Pompfrey finding out he had

been taking self-brewed Dreamless Sleep Potion, eventually almost leading to his friend's premature death. Regulus also quickly realised that Potter had somehow managed to be involved in way too personal stuff, but he shrugged the thought off immediately. One fucking headache at a time.

"So – that doesn't leave me with much," Regulus concluded for Potter.

They went silent for a while, Potter looking at the ceiling, lost in thought. Regulus watched him closely. He was tall, lean and muscular and his glasses made him look smart, witty – not that he wasn't, Regulus knew, but the glasses made it obvious to the outside world.

"We could make it ourselves. You *do* have some experience with self-medicating, after all," Potter said.

Regulus let out a bark of laughter at the serious tone of the bloke. It was impossible – they'd need so many ingredients, probably not easily accessible, let alone in less than a week, and Merlin knew how long it'd take to make it…

"I'm serious," Potter continued, slightly offended. "It isn't hard–"

"Not hard?" Regulus interrupted him. "You'd need tons of ingredients–"

"Only five."

This took Regulus by surprise. Not the number of ingredients per se – but that Potter seemed to know this. And that he was clearly *serious*. "What?"

"We'd only need five ingredients," he continued, "and only the numbing plant, acmella oleracea, is a bit hard to get your hands onto…"

"Well the numbing plant would be rather convenient," Regulus pointed out, "seeing we'd be making *numbing* cream."

Potter laughed. "Yes, but I said *a bit hard* – not 'impossible'."

Regulus was too much in shock to answer.

"Okay, so, it'll only need twelve hours for the plant to properly mix with the other ingredients, so – let's say we make it together? After the ASS-thing on Thursday?"

Regulus, perplexed by the fact that – apart from offering to help him out – Potter was seriously thinking he could get his hands on this exotic plant before Thursday, nodded weakly.

“How do you know how to make this cream in the first place?”

Potter rolled his eyes and raised from his seat. “You’re not the only one with brains in this Castle.”

That much had become clear.

“How are you going to get that plant?”

“Ahh,” Potter smirked, his brown eyes twinkling, “ask me no questions and I will tell no lies.”

He laughed and made his way to the door. “Now, I have … other matters to attend to, but don’t worry – we’ll pull it off.”

Regulus looked at Potter who had just opened the door. He paused and turned around, the same mischievous look in his eyes while he interlocked them with Regulus’s.

“Do wear Muggle clothes more often, Black,” he smirked. “It looks oddly good on you.”

And with that, he was gone.

Chapter 15: Of Creams & Pranks

Regulus managed to get through the weekend – including the continuous party planning – and the beginning of his first full week at Hogwarts unscathed. He had faked being under the weather on Monday so he could skive off Quidditch practice, and had pretended to still feel rather ill on Wednesday – therefore only being able to participate in the crucial parts of the training. So he had gotten out of much of the deserved scolding by Vanity, although he was positive that she was very concerned about the upcoming match – he hadn't had a solid practice for weeks due to the holidays and the only proper training she witnessed had been a total disaster. He couldn't blame her anxiety – in her place, he'd positively shit his pants.

Still, he'd be glad to get rid of the pressure that came with the upcoming match – all his friends were looking forward to the party afterwards, and they'd also celebrate Evan's and Barty's birthday. It'd be a very, very bad time to fly like a Muggle and make a complete idiot of himself.

After tonight, though, he'd be closer to victory once they had managed to make the numbing cream – or *if* they managed. Potter had looked so sure of himself but Regulus had an inkling that he might be the kind to overestimate his own capabilities. He had looked it up and well, it turned out the numbing plant *was* hard to come by and Sprout obviously didn't hold one in the Green Houses, so how Potter thought to get his hand on one was a bloody mystery to him.

Another mystery was what was expected of these ASS-meetings now they had finished their first assignment and had no idea what their next task would be. It was the first meeting since the Relay, and Regulus had taken his homework with him just in case. He had to admit, though, that he was rather on schedule with his essays, for he had generally avoided the common room – and its distractions in the form of Barty and Evan – and had studied in the library, where his other distraction - in the form of Isa - hadn't been seen much because she somehow managed to be saddled with two ASS-meetings around the weekend.

So, Regulus made his way towards the familiar Charms classroom with less reluctance than normally, for he could finally finish his Potions essay and well, he *was* curious about Potter's plan…

He, oddly good-humouredly, swung the door open and collapsed on

the pouffes — though carefully, because of his back — whistling a jaunty tune from the Hobgoblins.

“Good evening, Mr. Black,” sounded McGonagall’s voice.

Regulus froze mid-whistle, snapping his head towards the Deputy Headmistress.

“Oh,” he said stiffly. “Good evening, Professor.”

Next to her, Potter muffled a laugh, his shoulders shaking. Regulus shot him a death glare.

“Couldn’t warn me there, could you?” Regulus hissed when Potter took a seat next to him.

He snorted. “Learn to read the room before you walk into it, Black.”

Regulus scowled but bit back a retort. Well, so much for his Potions essay – obviously McGonagall was here to brief them on their upcoming assignment, meaning they’d probably have to dive into it right away. They waited impatiently for everyone to show up – with Selwyn, naturally, entering the classroom last, flustered as ever.

Potter leaned in on Regulus and whispered, with a smirk: “You reckon she still doesn’t know the way here?”

Regulus stifled a laugh. “Definitely. She'd get lost trying to find the Dungeons if she stood outside the entrance."

“You could walk her here, you know – unity and all,” Potter suggested, eyes twinkling with mischief.

Regulus shot him a sarcastic look. “You go pick her up then, if you’re that concerned.”

Before Potter could fire off a witty retort, McGonagall gave a small cough, cutting through the whispers, and welcomed them all.

“Good evening,” she began, her sharp eyes sweeping the room. “Now – with the first assignment behind us, and the second one approaching quicker than you would anticipate, it is time to inform you on the nature of the assignment that will take place the week before Easter.”

The six students sat in complete silence, hanging on her every word.

"The next assignment will be... a Duelling Gauntlet."

"Wow," Coolidge breathed in awe.

"Well, this ought to be fun," Potter smirked, clearly pleased.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow, cutting off the murmur. "This will be a cross-group competition. Each group will select four students to compete. Through several knockout phases, the remaining students will proceed to the semi-finals, and ultimately, the finals..."

"*Wicked*," Coolidge whispered, wide-eyed.

"Tonight, you will decide who among you will participate in the duelling competition. You will start with simple spells, teach each other, and learn from each other. I trust it goes without saying that standard duelling rules apply — no spells cast in each other's backs, no harmful curses, and so forth. For now, we'll start with forming pairs for practice duels…"

Regulus and Potter interlocked gazes – their team was fact.

"...of my choosing," McGonagall added, her lips curving into the tiniest smirk as groans echoed around the room.

"Now, Ms. Selwyn, you are with Ms. Khan –" they both looked rather disgruntled by the fact "–and Ms. Thompson, you are with Mr. Potter–" Regulus's heart dropped, that'd mean… "–leaving you, Mr. Black, with Mr. Coolidge."

Regulus steadfastly avoided looking Potter's way, but the sounds of him snickering and stifling a laugh couldn't be missed.

"Tosser," he hissed.

"Now, before you commence," McGonagall continued, ignoring the undercurrents of displeasure. "you will need to decide which four of you will present your group in the competition. I will return in an hour to check your progress."

And with that, she swept out of the room, leaving the six students glancing awkwardly around at each other — Khan and Thompson across the room, Coolidge bouncing on his feet, and Selwyn still lingering near the door, looking just as lost as when she came in.

Potter seemed to follow his gaze.

"How about us sitting this one out and having Selwyn and Coolidge

participate? It'd really spice things up," Potter whispered.

Regulus couldn't suppress a laugh. "Let's pit Selwyn against her twin brother while we're at it," he whispered back, humoured by Potter's smirk, "with a bit of luck, they'll take each other out."

They both broke out in laughter, drawing some surprised looks from their fellow champions, of which they had very little eye.

"So," Thompson eventually said, breaking the silence among the remaining four, "who wants to compete?"

"I'm in," Khan said immediately. "You too, Felicity?"

Thompson nodded. All four of them turned their eyes towards Regulus and Potter lounging on the pouffes.

"Yeah, yeah," Potter gave in, waving his hand in defeat. "We'll compete too. Right – Black?"

Regulus sighed, but conceded too – it'd have been hilarious to have Coolidge and Selwyn compete, but alas. "Sure, why not."

Every pair made its way to one corner of the classroom, Regulus reluctantly tugging behind a very enthusiastic Coolidge.

Coolidge, all smiles and nerves, was bouncing on his toes. "This is going to be fun, isn't it?" he asked, a nervous tremor lacing his voice. "I mean – I don't know much about duelling yet, but you do – I heard you beat Professor Thorne even… so… it's an honour!"

Regulus had a very hard time not laughing at Coolidge's obvious conflicting feelings of fear and excitement.

"Okay… well… you know the rules, right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Coolidge said, nodding his head and rattling off, "countdown, spells back and forth, no dangerous jinxes, no curses in the back…"

Regulus took a glance sideways and felt a ping of jealousy at the sight of Potter and Thompson embroiled in a heated duel, casting spells back and forth. Regulus had to admit though, that forcing to team up with Coolidge was actually a blessing in disguise – a proper duel in his current state would probably literally mean the end of him.

With that in mind, Regulus suggested: "So, let's practise your offence –

you fire spells, I will try to block them."

Coolidge nodded solemnly. "Right. Me, offence, you defence." He clutched his wand like it was his lifeline, his wide eyes betraying a mix of excitement and terror.

And he did literally nothing.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to stand there or are you actually going to try casting a spell?"

Coolidge nodded rapidly, raising his wand. "Yes! Here we go—*Expelliarmus!* "

Regulus barely flicked his wrist, blocking the spell with a casual *Protego* . Coolidge's wand hand shook slightly from the recoil.

"Try again," Regulus said.

Coolidge's enthusiasm returned with full force. "Right, okay, *Stupefy!* "

Regulus blocked that one just as easily, the spell bouncing off his shield like a light breeze. He gave Coolidge a flat stare.

"Try harder, Coolidge."

He looked momentarily disheartened, but then took a deep breath, determination flashing in his eyes. "Alright. Let me focus."

He took a step back and squared his shoulders. Regulus waited, slightly surprised to see the Hufflepuff straighten up with some semblance of seriousness.

"*Expelliarmus!* " Coolidge shouted again, this time with more force.

Regulus blocked it, as expected, but this time the spell had a bit more kick to it. It actually made him adjust his stance slightly, and he couldn't help the tiniest flicker of approval.

"Better," Regulus said. "But don't show what you're going to do. Mix it up. Keep me guessing."

Coolidge's face lit up like Christmas morning. "Really? You think that was better?"

"Let's go, Coolidge," Regulus sighed.

Coolidge grinned. “Okay, okay! How about this — *Petrificus Totalus!* ”

The spell shot out of Coolidge’s wand with surprising speed. Regulus managed to block it, but now he was forced to pay closer attention – Coolidge was clearly a fast learner.

Coolidge, seeing Regulus adjust his stance again, grew more confident. “Take this! *Stupefy!* ”

Caught off-guard, Regulus dodged to the side with a quick step, his eyes narrowing. Coolidge blinked in shock — he had actually made Regulus *move.*

“You dodged!” Coolidge said in awe. "I did that! Wow, I can't believe it!"

Regulus bit his lip in an attempt to suppress his laugh. “Don’t get cocky, Coolidge, c’mon, let’s go.”

Coolidge, practically vibrating with excitement, prepared for another spell. Regulus, to his surprise, found himself almost enjoying it. The Hufflepuff had guts.

After a few more rounds of spells — some blocked, some awkwardly cast — Coolidge wiped his brow, looking exhausted but grinning from ear to ear. “That was incredible! You’re really good, Regulus. I mean, obviously you are, but it’s just *wow* to watch you in action. You make it look so easy.”

“Focus on yourself, Coolidge. You’re not bad for a first-year.”

"Really? Wow! Thanks, Regulus!"

“Oh, *Regulus*, you’re *such* a good teacher.”

Regulus, after blocking another spell, jerked his head sideways to the sight of a sniggering Potter.

“You give it a go,” Regulus hissed, blocking another disarming spell, “you clearly have your hands free.”

“Nah,” Potter smirked, “McGonagall is here – I think we’re calling it a day.”

Regulus saw that McGonagall had indeed joined them and was ordering them to wrap up.

“Just stay behind,” Potter whispered before walking towards the Professor, “but don’t make it too obvious.”

Regulus nodded and followed him to the front of the classroom.

“I see that you have chosen the participants,” she said in an approving tone, holding up the piece of parchment that had the four names written on it. “Once all the groups’ competitors are chosen, we will announce the schedule. Now — Easter is only nine weeks away, so that will give you only eight regular moments to practise. I thus advise you to use your time and meetings wisely.”

“Can’t wait to tell Moony about this competition,” Potter said to himself with a content smirk. Something in Regulus’s subconscious registered this as an odd remark, but it would be weeks before it resurfaced and took full effect.

Following McGonagall, Khan, Thompson, Coolidge and Selwyn exited the classroom while Regulus and Potter pretended to be busy, very slowly packing up their stuff and Potter tying his shoelaces. Once the sound of talking and the tread of walking had died out, Potter peeked around the door to make sure no one was left behind and closed the door.

“Now, let the fun start,” he said with a smug smile, clapping his hands in excitement.

Regulus raised his eyebrows. “You seem to enjoy this.”

“Ah, there’s already enough misery in the world as it is,” Potter grinned, “might as well focus on the enjoyable parts.”

Potter walked to the desk in the front of the classroom, opened its drawer, and took out a small bag. “Now, as I said, it’s fairly easy to make…”

He carefully placed a bowl and a wooden spoon on the desk, then two tubes of something, a vail, mandrake root and the acmella oleracea.

“Where did you get all the ingredients?” Regulus asked, especially eyeing the acmella oleracea in astonishment.

“Ah, I had some nice collaborations with some people,” Potter smirked. He held up a tube. “Some beeswax, from Madam Pomfrey. Had to sacrifice some of my dignity, though – told her I had some sore spots from Quidditch in very particular places.” His eyes twinkled

good-humouredly. “Then–” he held out the other tube “–some coconut oil, nicked from my dear friend Mary. Then, this–” he gave the glass vail a little shake “ –some essence of dittany from dear old Slughorn. For that I had to sacrifice a lot more, though, for he cornered me into attending one of his horrible dinners in return. So for that, you owe me, Black.”

Regulus snorted, feeling that he owed Potter for a great deal more than just a stupid dinner.

“Now, the mandrake root was easy to grab from the Green Houses, but this—” he held up the numbing plant with pride, “this was the treasure of course. Had to nick it from Sprout’s bedroom personally.”

Regulus broke out in a fit of coughing. “W - what?” He had *so* many questions. “How did you know she had it in her bedroom in the first place?”

Potter laughed. “Ask me no questions and I will tell no lies.”

Regulus rolled his eyebrows at Potter’s mysterious tone. “Then – you just… took it?”

Potter put the beeswax and coconut oil in the bowl, mixing it with the wooden spoon, counting the movements. He stopped at fifteen.

“Yes, well, I like myself a challenge from time to time – a mission. I have a reputation to uphold, after all.” He grabbed the vail containing the essence of dittany. “Could you keep that up for me?” Regulus moved to grab it out of his hands, but was stopped by Potter. “No – with your wand, I mean, levitate it.”

Regulus nodded and held it up with his wand. Potter raised his own wand and heated the essence, then gestured Regulus to empty it in the bowl. He did as was told.

“You mean your ‘Marauder’-club?” Regulus asked with a light tone of exasperation, continuing their conversation.

Potter smirked. “Yes, although – this was a solitary mission, of course.”

Regulus looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“Could hardly include your brother in this without him ending up finding out about those–” he nodded at Regulus’s back, “–now could

I?"

Regulus considered this for a while.

"I am a trustworthy person, Black," Potter pointed out. "I don't break my promises. I am a bit of a Hufflepuff that way."

Regulus didn't really know what to say to this, and decided to pick up on the former sentence.

"But surely my brother must know something – he was there, during practice," he said, with a sour taste in his mouth thinking about the disastrous practice witnessed by Merlin knows how many Gryffindors and Ravenclaws.

Potter shot him a wry smile. "Well, Sirius couldn't even mount his broom – I think you on a broom in itself refuted the possibility of… being subjected to the same."

Regulus nodded, feeling the following silence weighing physically on his body. He was glad that Potter broke it with another instruction.

"Now, put the mandrake root in it, but keep it an inch above the liquid –" Regulus did so " –and I will…" he gave the bowl a twirl, circling it thrice, "yes… that's it."

"How come you just miraculously happen to know how to make this stuff?" Regulus decided to ask, the question very much occupying his brain for days.

"I like this stuff," he shrugged, "so my Mum's best friend is a Healer – very close to the family, and well, she spiked some interest in her field… and I like to read…"

He looked awfully modest for someone that was widely considered an arrogant tosser. Regulus was impressed, and well, that was rather scarce.

"You want to become a Healer?" Regulus asked. "You know – after Hogwarts?"

Potter looked at him, his eyes serious. "I'm more interested in the healing of the mind - I would love to become a Psychohealer. But I think by the time I finish Hogwarts, the need for normal Healers will be dire."

It was the first time the subject of the war came up. It was a sensitive topic, obviously, with both boys representing either side of the war. Regulus very much liked to steer away from the topic, for it underscored the irreconcilability of the reality outside with what was happening at that specific moment between the castle's walls.

"Now," Potter continued, "make sure the bowl doesn't move an inch, and I'll crush the numbing plant – yes, like that." He crushed it with his wand and added it to the bowl, Regulus diligently making sure the bowl remained completely still.

Light smoke erupted from the liquid that was slowly turning in a thicker mass. "Now, it has to remain still for twelve hours at least, so I'll just put it back into the drawer. No one is using this classroom anyway, and I'll get back to it tomorrow…"

He closed the drawer and nodded as if confirming his own words. The two boys slowly made their way to the door.

"Now, the match starts at eleven," Potter said businesslike before he opened the door, "that means you'll have finished breakfast at the Kitchens at around ten?"

Regulus looked at him, stunned, his eyes full with surprise. "W - what?" he sputtered. "How do you know about–"

Potter smirked. "We keep close tabs on other players' whereabouts and habits around matches, Black. And well, I have never seen you at breakfast before a match, and surely you *do* eat, so it's an easy guess."

Bloody hell, the bloke was sharp. He'd have to pit him against Isa sometime.

"Sharp, Potter."

"So – meet me here at ten."

Regulus nodded.

They both exited the classroom, walking to the staircases in silence.

"Later, Black."

"Later, Potter."

*****

Regulus woke up early on Saturday morning after another sleepless, sweaty night. He was welcomed by the January cold that met him when he jumped out of his bed and touched the ground, which he rather enjoyed for it at least forced him to wake up. He tiptoed to the bathroom where he put on his Quidditch gear as silently and painlessly as possible and then went for a small walk around the Hogwarts grounds before making his way to the Kitchens.

He was nervous — more than normally the case prior to a match. If the cream didn't work, he'd make a complete idiot of himself in front of the entire school. What if Potter had been playing him? Could it be a trick from his brother — revenge for what happened over the holidays? It'd be more logical than the scenario Regulus hoped to be true; the one involving Potter that somehow, despite all their differences, the war and Sirius between them, wanted to help Regulus out. Oh, and involving a Quidditch match — despite the rivalry on the pitch that might've even outshined the one regarding the war. No, it was impossible, too weird to be true, and yet, Potter's brown eyes had looked so genuine…

So, although he was anxious about Potter and whether he was at the heart of some cruel joke, he carefully made his way towards the Charms classroom, ignoring the exciting pre-match buzz that started to fill the castle.

When he entered the room, Potter was already there, the familiar bowl in front of him on the desk. He gave it a whiff. "Put some mint in it, it even smells nice."

Regulus rolled his eyes, not sure whether the bloke was just taking the piss.

"It has more benefits though," Potter continued with a serious face, "it has great calming effects, especially combined with mandrake root."

Regulus had no idea what to say. His throat had turned dry — he wanted to thank him, tell him that he was both stunned and relieved by his help, but something was weighing down on him and he couldn't find his voice.

"You nervous?" Potter asked, his eyes trailing carefully over Regulus.

"A bit." He was — not just about the match, also about this weird experimental cream. What if it went wrong and he'd feel this pain for the rest of his life? Or if it didn't work at all? Would it be too obvious to throw himself in front of a Bludger?

Potter nodded. “Now, get your jersey off and let’s put this cream on. You might want to close the door.” He motioned for Regulus to come over.

Regulus froze. “What?” Did he suggest *he’d* put it on?

Potter annoyedly rolled his eyes. “This cream isn’t like the one you’ve been using, Black – you won’t be able to put it on yourself.”

Regulus was still frozen to the spot. “*Why*?”

“Well, to be honest, I think it’s a bloody miracle you manage to reach the entirety of your back in the first place – I mean, your brother forces me every night to put the regular cream on,” Potter started, giving the bowl a final whirl. Regulus didn’t share the fact that he couldn’t reach all of it but just skipped the hard part. “But then again – that one relieves immediately, doesn’t it?”

Regulus nodded, unsure where this was going.

“This one – this one is going to be painful as hell when you put it on. It’ll take a couple of minutes for it to start working properly and *then* it takes effect.”

Regulus still didn’t really understand. “So? I can handle some pain.”

Potter arched his eyebrows and then shot him a challenging look. “Well, you try it, then.”

Regulus closed the door, made his way over to the desk awkwardly, then scooped some cream out of the bowl and carefully stuck his hand under his jersey.

And *fuck* was Potter right – the moment the cream touched his skin, it was as if he was back there – back in Sirius’s bedroom, the whipping sound of Mother’s wand penetrating his ears, and his back, it was *aflame* , it burnt through his skin… Regulus had no control whatsoever over anything at this point, so he swore and clenched and clutched all at the same time.

“*Fuck fuck fuck* ,” he breathed, waiting for the pain to eb away, for relief to swoop in.

It took a horribly long time for that to happen – the cream numbing the tiny spot that he’d touched before the excruciating pain had both paralysed and intensified all senses.

Once the pain had gone entirely, he opened his eyes and was met with Potter's concerned face. "Told you," he said, although it had no edge to it at all, his voice instead laced with sympathy.

"*Fuck* ," Regulus repeated, taking in a deep breath.

"Let me apply it," Potter offered, "I'll be quick – you'll feel it all at once instead of going through it over and over again."

Regulus honestly didn't know whether he was going to survive this – would he pass out?

"I'll get you up and running before the match in case you pass out," Potter said with a small smirk, apparently reading his mind.

"Alright," Regulus gave in with a sigh. "Let's get this over with."

Potter nodded. They stood there. In silence.

"Now, get on it," Potter said with a smirk way too smug for Regulus's liking. "Strip for me, Black."

Regulus rolled his eyes and slowly took off his jersey – and although it was only his jersey, it felt like he stood there completely, to the last patch of skin, naked in front of Potter. In normal circumstances he would feel that way — deprived of his robes, his chest bare — but now, with the skin of his back testament to so many deep-rooted things that Potter couldn't even start to understand — he felt as if even his soul stood naked in front of him. He swallowed and reminded himself that there was no other choice. Either this or losing the match.

Luckily, Potter discretely looked away until the moment Regulus turned his back towards him.

And now it was Potter's turn to swear and scowl. "*Fuck*," he hissed. "Fucking barbaric —" he seemed to remember he was scolding Regulus's mother "—sorry - no *fuck* that, I'm not apologising for being human — fucking barbaric, bigoted—"

"*Potter*," Regulus warned him, but he couldn't suppress a small smile at the foul language that was very unlike Potter.

"Yes, alright," Potter seemed to compose himself. "Here we go."

Before he'd completely braced himself, he felt the warm touch of Potter's hand on his left shoulder, undoubtedly to keep him in place

once he'd put his other hand on his back. Regulus shuddered at the touch and the feeling of Potter's breath in his neck. "Here we go," he whispered in repetition. He had no chance to give his pumping heart a second thought before he was overwhelmed with the bone-breaking pain again.

Again, he swore, groaned, cramped, buckled and shuddered in pain – he couldn't handle this, there was no *way* he was going to survive this – he couldn't breathe, oh *fuck* did it hurt – no please, *stop*, fuck – fuck – fuck.

And then it stopped -- the pain subsiding and a wave of something new sweeping over the skin of his back – it felt, it felt as if he was *new*, *reborn* almost. The pain that he had been subjected to for weeks – it was *gone*.

Still, he had to pull himself together from the torture he had just undergone, and he was glad that his back was still turned to Potter when he realised his eyes were teary. He quickly wiped the tears – and sweat – away and sighed.

"You alright, Black?" Potter asked with a small cough.

"Terrific," Regulus said, his voice still weak. He turned around and took the jersey that Potter held up, putting it on and feeling delighted by the absence of any pain while touching, grazing and even scratching his skin.

"Here, have some of this," Potter offered, handing out a piece of chocolate, not meeting Regulus's eyes. "Would be a bit of a disappointment if you were to simply pass out after all our efforts."

Regulus took the chocolate and then looked at Potter who'd started busying himself with packing up all the stuff on the desk. Once he was done, they looked at each other, and Regulus felt the weird bond that had been forged over this strange course of events.

"Well, go smash them, Black," Potter said, a kind, small smile across his face.

Regulus swallowed and stood still for a split second, looking at Potter in all earnesty. "Thanks, Potter."

Potter nodded, and then they parted ways.

*****

If Regulus thought that this would mark the end of Potter's strange presence in his life, he was in for quite a ride.

Naturally, with his body back in full function now that he wasn't tormented by the pain in his back, and the absence of Potter — or anyone coming close to his competences on a broomstick — on the opposing team, the game was practically a done deal. He had managed to catch the snitch some twenty minutes into the game and that was that.

Relieved that it had all worked out — Potter actually coming to his rescue and the numbing cream working miracles — Regulus took place in the common room after dinner, waiting for the party to get going. He knew that he'd have to pay for the freedom his back had been given at some point once he had regained full senses, but that'd be hours away and it was good to finally be able to properly breathe.

The organisers — Barty, Evan, Avery and Mulciber — had done a terrific job as always; a large table was transformed into a makeshift bar stocked with all kinds of beverages (most of them illegal and smuggled into the castle by Dolohov and Lestrange), the Wireless was blaring through the common room, there were snacks on tables scattered through the room and the place was suitably decorated with all kinds of decorations and ornaments that underscored Slytherin's victory on the pitch and its supremacy in general. Around the improvised dance floor there were two enchanted serpents singing '*no flop with Black on top!'* – (a horrid phrase that Regulus found painfully awkward, though Evan had defended it with "You know — on top of your game!") and "*The more Black, the more crack*!" ("They'll crack, you know!"). The nonsensical rhymes irritated Regulus almost as much as the serpents' random timing, with their voices constantly overlapping in an erratic, discordant mess.

After a while the entire common room was in full swing with people dancing, drinking, laughing and snogging, and for once, with all his troubles and pain out of sight, Regulus found himself actually enjoying the party.

Barty and Evan, feeling that tonight was also about them because both their birthdays were the upcoming week, were in high spirits and thus making complete fools of themselves. They were currently atop a table, with the majority of the Slytherins surrounding them and cheering them on while they were forced to down a glass of Merlin-knows-what in one gulp.

“DRINK, DRINK, DRINK!”

“No Party without Barty!”

“It’s all about rhymes tonight, isn’t it?” Regulus coined dryly.

“Yes, clearly there’s a great poet among us,” Isa grinned, looking at the scene as well. After they were forced to chug down another drink by Dolohov and Lestrange, Isa thought it’d be better to intervene and steered the boys to the dance floor. Regulus, needing little to be reminded of Evan’s near death experience at Halloween, was much on the same page.

“Ah, Black, our favourite player,” Dolohov said smugly, throwing an arm around Regulus’s shoulders. Regulus was very glad that the numbing cream was still doing its job, for otherwise he would’ve probably passed out by the pain.

“Yes, another *magnificent* catch, Black,” Lestrange slurred, throwing his arm around his other shoulder and ruffling his hair playfully. He reeked of Firewhiskey.

Regulus, very much aware of the fact that they were probably going to subject him to the same public drinking game, quickly dived out of their arms and fled to Isa on the dancefloor.

The idea of having to find a way to get out of the entire common room chanting for him to down his drink on a stage sent Regulus literally shuddering. He very much did *not* want to drink – both out of conscientious objection *and* out of self-protection because he knew he’d make a complete fool out of himself. He was not used to drinking and downing a glass of whatever in one tug would probably have him vomiting all over the floor.

“Ah, you’re trying to find refuge here?” Isa smirked.

“Ha ha,” Regulus shot sarcastically. “Don’t want to end up like them.” He nodded his head to the end of the dance floor where Evan and Barty were playfully slow dancing like a pair very much in love.

“Well, if you want to use me as a means to get out of peer pressure, you’d better have a proper dance with me,” Isa said sternly.

Regulus perked his ears and sighed in exasperation when he heard a horrible, cheesy song from Celestina Warbeck filling the common room.

Isa smirked. “Ha ha, that’s what they call *karma*.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but realised it was still a rather easy choice when he saw Dolohov and Lestrange grabbing Crabbe and Selwyn by their collar and steering them to the bar.

He put his arms around Isa’s waist and rolled his eyes at her smug smile.

“No snogging, Nott.”

She let out a bark of laughter. “Wouldn’t ask you to, Black.”

*****

A little while later, their small group of friends was gathered in the corner of the common room, eyeing their fellow students and taking a much-needed breather from the drinking and dancing. Particularly Barty and Evan could visibly use a break with Dolohov and Lestrange’s overenthusiastic efforts to ply them with drinks.

Regulus glanced around the room, his gaze landing on Dolohov and Lestrange, who were scanning the crowd, likely in search of their next target. In a rare, fleeting moment of rebellion, Regulus discreetly raised his wand and non-verbally sent four glasses of whatever concoction the two seventh-years were holding toppling over their heads.

The sight of Dolohov and Lestrange drenched in liquor was amusing enough on its own, but what happened next was nothing short of priceless. Somehow — and Regulus had no idea how — the decorative serpent above them began to, quite literally, vomit pink confetti. Now, this in itself was quite funny because the sudden vomiting scared the bejesus out of the very tough-looking seventh-years, but the effects were *grand* when the confetti mixed with the liquor, essentially covering the two blokes in awfully pink smudge.

Regulus couldn’t suppress the urge to laugh at the sight.

“Oi, look at that!” Evan said, gesturing everyone to look at the seventh-years. The rest of the common room quickly followed suit, pointing and laughing at the sight of Dolohov and Lestrange, drenched and covered in pink sludge.

“What happened to *them*?” Amaryllis asked in shock, her eyes wide.

"Weird," Isa whispered in Regulus's ear, making him snap his head toward her. She raised an eyebrow and gave him a sly look. "Your wand doesn't have anything to do with that, does it?" Her eyes flicked meaningfully toward his wand, partially hidden beneath his sleeve.

"*My* wand, Nott? How positively *rabble-rousing* of you," Regulus replied, playing innocent with a smirk.

Isa rolled her eyes, albeit with a small smile. She was undoubtedly about to retort something sharp when they were both distracted by the sudden disgusting smell of cigarette smoke.

“What’s *that* ?” Regulus asked, shooting Evan and Barty a disgusted look. They were both lounging on the sofa, drawing on a cigarette. Their smug looks and lifted shoulders indicated they probably thought they looked very cool.

“What – are you guys *Muggles*?” Isa shot them. She was right – although cigarettes were an indispensable part of the Muggle world, pipe smoking was the standard among witches and wizards of an older age and well, cigarettes were very much a symbol of Mudblood culture. Though, Regulus had to admit, they were gaining ground among other segments of society as well – very much underscored by the fact that Barty and Evan were smoking them casually in the common room. Well – casually was a big word, with both of them hacking between drags.

Isa roared with laughter at their obvious amateurism.

“Shut up, Nott,” Evan coughed, looking warily at Amaryllis and Melania whom they were undoubtedly trying to impress with their rebellious behaviour.

“Yes, goody two-shoes,” Barty chipped in. “You wouldn’t even dare to touch one of these – afraid that it might affect your precious grades.”

This seemed to touch a nerve, as Isa stiffened at the jab, her eyes narrowing. She tilted her head, locking into Barty with a determined glare.

"Toss me one, then," she said, her tone daring as she nodded toward the cigarette pack.

Barty’s grin widened, and Evan let out a low whistle. Amaryllis and Melania leaned forward, clearly anticipating what was about to happen. Regulus, meanwhile – well, he just watched with arched

eyebrows, utterly bewildered by his friends' antics.

Barty lobbed the package toward Isa, who in turn snatched it out of the air with a sharpness very much mirroring that of her glare. She tapped the pack, causing a cigarette to pop out, then took it and lit it with a flick of her wand. She inhaled deeply, holding Barty's gaze as she blew the smoke straight into his face.

"Look at that, Crouch," she said coolly, "and not a single cough."

She took a few more drags, her expression calm and collected, and then put it out with her wand and tossed the remainder of the cigarette in the fireplace.

"Now," Isa continued, ignoring all the stunned stares from her friends, "I am going for a drink."

*****

As the evening wore on, things started to get weirder. It wasn't just the serpents above Dolohov and Lestrange that had started to behave strangely; no, soon enough, the singing serpents next to the dance floor were chased by a badger, an eagle and a lion – all seemingly out of nowhere. Their pursuit ended in the serpent's dramatic defeat when they plunged headlong into the punch bowl. Regulus couldn't hide his satisfaction at seeing the obnoxious banners meet their messy end and had sighed contentedly.

But the chaos didn't stop there. One by one, the cauldron cakes and pumpkin pastries began to explode, sending shrieking girls running for their dormitories. The fire in the fireplace then morphed into a roaring, lion-shaped bonfire that wouldn't stop bellowing. Meanwhile, house banners grew legs and began rampaging through the common room, resulting in at least one broken bone, while rogue Snitches appeared out of thin air and started smacking people on the head. Drinks exploded or spontaneously changed colour, and fireworks — from Merlin knew where — were flying … well, everywhere.

It was utter mayhem.

Regulus somehow managed to dodge most of the exploding food and random fireworks, but he felt his robes starting to weigh heavily on his back that was starting to get its senses back – so he decided to defy another series of flares roaring through the air on his way to the dormitory to swap his robes for a more comfortable sweater.

The quiet that greeted him in the dorm was a welcome change from the chaos outside. He quickly exchanged his heavy robes for the light sweater and sat down on the edge of his bed and—

"*Ouch!* "

Startled, Regulus jumped up, instinctively drawing his wand and then groaned.

"*Potter?* What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

He blinked, trying to make sense of the situation. He hadn't had a single drop of alcohol, but there was Potter, his chaotic hair sticking out in all directions, a bemused grin on his face as he wriggled out from under Regulus's bed. The Gryffindor stretched casually, then made himself comfortable on Regulus's bed, patting the duvet like he owned the place.

"So this is your bed, then?" he asked, patting the duvet cheerfully and grinning as if this were perfectly normal.

"Like you wouldn't know," Regulus replied stiffly, pointing at his initials and the family crest on the nightstand. What the *fuck* was Potter doing here?

"Oh, no, I haven't been snooping around," Potter said with a mischievous grin. "I'd hate to invade someone's privacy."

Regulus glared at him, taking in the sight of the Gryffindor lounging comfortably on his bed, legs crossed and hands behind his head like he belonged there.

"Oh yes, you're clearly very considerate of people's boundaries," Regulus shot him dryly.

Potter laughed but didn't get a chance to respond as the dormitory door suddenly burst open. Barty stumbled in, arm-in-arm with a giggling Amaryllis.

For a split second, Regulus locked eyes with Potter's, which grew to the size of Quaffles in pure panic. In the next split second, Regulus was yanked onto the bed as Potter swiftly pulled the curtains closed. Before Regulus could even process what was happening, Potter cast a silencing spell. The bloke was *fast* .

The awkwardness of the situation sank in as Regulus realised how

uncomfortably close he now was to Potter — in his own bed, no less. This was *weird* .

“What are you doing here, Potter?” Regulus hissed, pulling his legs away as they brushed against Potter’s.

“No need to whisper, Black,” Potter said, his voice raised to make a point. “My Muffliato is perfect.”

Regulus rolled his eyes and wiped some confetti off his shoulder. Then, he suddenly recalled a very weird conversation with Potter months ago.

“What is the first thing you would do if you had an Invisibility Cloak?”

“I’d… sneak into the Slytherin Dungeons and redecorate it with Gryffindor colours. Just for fun.”

Regulus groaned as the realisation dawned. “It was *you,* wasn’t it? *You* enchanted the decorations.”

“Took you long enough to figure it out,” Potter said with a grin.

“Oh,” Regulus said, his eyes squeezed in thin lines as suspicion crept in. “You’re here with my brother, aren’t you? And the other two?”

Potter chuckled. “No, just your brother. He managed to slip out early though,” he said, glancing at the mirror sticking out of his pocket. “I was on my way out but ran into some third-years and was forced to take refuge… here.”

Regulus was about to retort something nasty when he was taken off guard by some *very, very* disturbing and intimate sounds coming from Barty’s four-poster bed.

“*Oh, Barty*,” Amaryllis moaned. “Y*es, like that.*”

The blood drained from Regulus’s face as he exchanged horrified glances with Potter, who burst out laughing uproariously. “*No way,”* he laughed. “Is that Crouch and Greengrass … *shagging*?”

Regulus squeezed his eyes shut in pure mortification as a truly unsettling noise escaped Barty’s throat, accompanied by the unmistakable squeaky rhythm of bed springs.

“Make it stop,” Regulus hissed, grabbing Potter’s sweater in a desperate grip.

Potter was still laughing. “What are you getting mad at me for?” he whispered back. “I’m not getting it on with Greengrass! Besides, you could join them — Mr. ‘*no flop with Black on top*’– ”

“Oh, *screw you*,” Regulus snapped. “You forced me to hide here! I can hardly get away from here without them thinking I’m some kind of pervert now, can I?”

Potter smirked. “Yeah, true. But you’re a wizard, you know that, right, Black?” With a flick of his wand, Potter cast a quick *Silencio* on Barty’s bed. Regulus made a mental note to research a permanent version of that spell.

“Now, Potter,” Regulus sighed, exasperated, “what are you actually doing here?”

“Like I said,” Potter replied nonchalantly, “we were just having some fun with the decorations; *nice* collaboration we had going, by the way–”

“Collaboration? What are you talking about?”

“Well, Dolohov and Lestrange wouldn’t have looked half as nice if you hadn’t drowned them in Firewhiskey–”

“Oh shit,” Regulus groaned, piecing it together, “*you* were behind the confetti?”

“Obviously,” Potter said, looking rather pleased with himself. “Now, think you can check if the coast is clear?”

Regulus blinked. “What do you mean, Potter?”

“I need to get out of here, don’t I?” Potter said, rolling his eyes. “Just check the staircase, make sure it’s empty.”

“And *how* exactly are you planning on sneaking through the Slytherin common room without being spotted? If someone sees you — and they will — they’ll probably skin you alive.”

“Charming housemates you have,” Potter remarked with a grin. “But don’t worry. The narrow staircase is the only problem. Leave the rest to me.”

“*How* ?” Regulus asked sceptically.

Potter just smirked. “Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell no lies.”

“I hate that stupid quote.”

“Yes, ‘*the more Black, the more Crack*’ does have a nicer ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Regulus groaned.

“Why shouldn’t I just rat you out, though? I’m sure Dolohov, Lestrange, or even Avery would *love* a little heart-to-heart with you.”

Potter’s expression hardened. “After all the trouble I went through to make sure tonight’s party was a victory celebration?”

“You didn’t catch the Snitch,” Regulus countered, though it was a weak argument. Without Potter’s stupid numbing cream, Regulus wouldn’t have been able to play in the first place.

“Cheap, Black.”

“Yeah,” Regulus sighed. “I am aware. Let’s put a Muffliato on the bed as well and let me see whether the coast is clear.”

Potter nodded in appreciation, casting a Muffliato around Barty’s bed, then followed Regulus toward the door. Regulus cracked it open, surveying the chaotic common room below. Fortunately, the staircase was clear.

“You’re good to go,” Regulus whispered.

“Thanks, Black,” Potter said, grinning. “Now, just stay in the dorm for a few seconds while I get down the stairs, yeah? Don’t want anyone getting the wrong idea about us in case something goes wrong.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow at the odd request but figured it made sense. The idea of them being seen together *was* , admittedly, uncomfortable. He nodded.

Just as Potter was about to slip through the door, he turned back, his expression suddenly curious.

“Do you smoke, Black?”

Regulus blinked at the random question. “No, of course not, Potter.”

Potter threw him a contemplative look, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Well, in that case — keep an eye on your girl.” He glanced at the staircase another time. “Because *someone’s* taught her to smoke and it

clearly wasn't you."

Chapter 16: Of Pink & Pasts

Of all the months a year had to offer, Regulus hated February the most. It might have been the shortest month, but a week felt like a whole season, time dragging endlessly while the world impatiently awaited the first hints of spring. It truly was the most pointless month of them all.

This year was no exception. Not even the criminally large amount of homework, the late nights at the pitch or the weekly ASS-meetings seemed to speed up time. Worse still, his back was finally returning to its normal state; essentially, that was a good thing, but for Regulus it meant that the dreams at night grew more vivid, as if the physical pain had dulled the painful scenes in his head at night.

On top of that, *February* meant *Valentine's Day* and whereas the previous years that had meant little in Regulus's life, this year everyone around him seemed to go bonkers over it, making his life more miserable than ever.

"So — you going with Amaryllis?"

"What?" Barty asked, confused.

"Hogsmeade, mate," Evan clarified. "Saturday."

They were sitting in the common room — Regulus, Barty and Evan on one sofa, with Mulciber, Snape and Avery across from them. It was a bit too crowded for Regulus's liking, but he didn't have a valid excuse to leave other than one that would make him look like a complete swot. So he stayed, even when all forces decided to work against him and Selwyn and Crabbe squeezed in as well.

"Oh," Barty said in a flat tone, "don't know."

"It's Valentine's," Evan pressed.

"Yeah, so?" Barty said, visibly uninterested.

"Might want to take your girl out on Valentine's, Crouch," Avery added with a smirk.

"She's not… my *girl*," Barty said, defensive now.

Regulus watched his friend carefully. Barty looked uncomfortable

under the collective gaze of the group. Amaryllis and Barty had an awful number of nightly rendezvous going on for her not to be 'his girl'. It bothered Regulus – the two of them weren't very discrete about it and he always felt a bit uncomfortable by the idea that, although a good Muffliato spared him from the sounds, there was a girl in the dorm doing Merlin knew what with one of his friends. Melania visited Evan too, albeit less frequently and she at least had the decency to sneak out before dawn. Amaryllis, though, apparently knew no shame and once Barty even had to physically stop her from using their bathroom to shower. Regulus shuddered at the thought.

"*That's* the spirit," Mulciber said, clapping Barty on his back. "No strings attached – just a bit of fun, eh?"

Regulus felt very out of place as the others laughed and whistled. Luckily, the conversation shifted away from Amaryllis and Barty, turning instead to Quidditch. Regulus, however, was already lost in thought, thinking ahead to the weekend.

He had promised Cissy to meet her at the Three Broomsticks at one o'clock, thinking that he'd accompany his friends to the village and just take a break from them for an hour or so to see his cousin and then rejoin them. He was thus very disappointed to hear that all his friends had plans. He should've realised, of course, that Barty and Evan would probably take their girlfriends out for Valentine's – Barty might be all indifferent and cool with others around, for Amaryllis it was a done deal. This left Isa, but to Regulus's utter disappointment, she wasn't going either – too many 'annoying, lovesick students taking over the village' and she had 'tons of inches to write' for various subjects.

Still, Regulus had already agreed to meet Cissy, and after all she'd done for him, he couldn't let her down. So, he resigned himself to the fact that he'd have to go to Hogsmeade alone.

So, on Saturday morning, Regulus briefly considered tagging along with Barty, Evan and their girlfriends to the village before slipping away to meet Cissy – but, when he was greeted by the sound of Amarylis's giggling in the early morning in their dormitory, the idea very quickly lost its appeal. Sure, he'd look like a complete idiot, going to the village on his own on *Valentine's Day* for that matter, but it would still be better than playing the fifth wheel to a group filled with Melania and Amaryllis's incessant giggling and snogging.

"You sure you're not coming?" Regulus tried again as he pulled on his

cloak in the common room.

The common room was nearly empty – most students had left already, and Isa had claimed the best table for studying, positioned close to the fireplace but private enough to avoid being bothered by the inevitable wave of noisy first- and second-years who would take over the common room in the absence of the other students.

"No, thanks," she said with a wry smile. "*Really* not in the mood for lovesick–"

"–lovebirds, annoying students – inches to write, blah blah," Regulus filled in irritatedly.

"Yes, thank you," Isa said with a small smirk. "You're planning to hang around after meeting Cissy?"

Regulus shook his head. "No – I see no reason why. Not sure why we're meeting in Hogsmeade… and on *Valentine's Day* of all days…"

Isa raised her eyebrows. "You don't?"

Regulus shifted awkwardly, realising that he was apparently missing something. "...No?"

"She's surely going to discuss the wedding," Isa pointed out as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"The wedding? *Why*?" he asked, his frustration growing. His hand gestures very much gave away his annoyance.

"Well," Isa said, closing her textbook with a snap, "she's your favourite cousin, isn't she? Practically your older sister."

Regulus nodded – well, of course.

"Regulus," Isa sighed, sounding exasperated, "you do realise you're the Black heir now, right? You don't think there's a role for the *heir* in the *last* Black wedding – aside from your own, obviously?"

Regulus's throat went dry. Sure he was the heir, but that hadn't really … changed anything so far, really. Life had carried on as usual and apart from the sight of Sirius bleeding to death visiting him frequently at night, he hadn't really felt any different. When Bellatrix got married, he and Sirius had still been children, with no role in the ceremony. Frankly, they had both been too terrified of Bellatrix to do

anything other than steer clear of her at the event.

What would 'a role in the wedding' mean, though? He was still a kid – he had yet to turn *fifteen*, two years away from coming of age. Surely all he had to do was show up, right?

Isa smirked, clearly enjoying watching Regulus piece things together, his mind filling with new questions.

"Merlin, you are so *daft* sometimes," she teased.

"I'm not even of age!" Regulus protested. "What role could I positively have in the ceremony? I'm not even old enough to be a witness–"

"True," Isa cut him off, "if you were of age, there'd be more to it of course, but mark my words, your mum will do whatever she can to present you as the new, true heir to the Noble House of Black."

Regulus fell down in one of the chairs across from Isa. "Well, *fuck* me."

Isa let out a very inelegant snort.

*****

As usual, Isa had been right. Thinking about the last Hogsmeade weekend when he had been late for Lucius, Regulus made sure to show up on time this time. This had made things rather awkward, of course – for he found himself occupying one of the booths all alone while the Broomsticks bustled with annoyingly affectionate couples and a few scattered groups of friends. Trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible, he slouched into his seat, hoping to go unnoticed.

He was positively relieved when Cissy entered – looking flawless as always. Her blonde hair was perfectly curled, falling in soft waves around her shoulders, and she wore a fitted, dark green velvet cloak that matched the Slytherin colours, bringing out her striking blue eyes. Regulus tried not to laugh at the obvious stares from both impressed boys and envious girls around the pub.

"Reg," Cissy greeted warmly, planting a kiss on his cheek. He helped her slip off her coat, while Madam Rosmerta quickly made her way towards their table to take their order of two Butterbeers.

"How are you, Reg?" she asked once they had settled in. "I haven't interrupted a date, have I?"

Regulus snorted. “No, don’t worry.” He had a good idea where this conversation was headed, or more specifically, who it was about–

“No date with Isa on Valentine’s?” she teased, smirking.

Rolling his eyes, Regulus sighed. “Why can’t anyone just let that go?”

Cissy laughed. “Sorry, it’s just – well, you know –”

Regulus nodded, having heard it all numerous times — they’d be so great together, destined to end up together and so on and so forth.

“So tell me — how’s classes? How’s Quidditch? Any interesting encounters with Thorne lately?”

Not a stranger to Cissy’s boundless curiosity whenever they had the chance to catch up, Regulus grinned and gave her a rundown of his life at Hogwarts. He recapped the latest Quidditch match— leaving out the numbing cream, of course — and described the practices, his classes, and the dull meetings with Thorne that had been going into the same we're-lying-low-discourse over and over again. He also briefly touched on the ASS meetings but skirted around any mention of Potter.

“How about you?” Regulus asked once he felt they’d more than sufficiently covered his side of things. “How’s things with Lucius?”

Cissy’s face lit up with a dreamy smile. “It’s wonderful, of course — especially now that we’ve sorted out most of the planning. There have been a few bumps along the way — deciding who to invite, the venue…”

“It will be hosted at Dreadmoor Keep, right?” Regulus asked.

She nodded. “Yes, the ceremony will be outside on the premises, although the evening reception will be inside.”

Regulus nodded, sensing they were getting close to the real reason for this conversation.

“Now,” Cissy cleared her throat delicately, “as for the ceremony…I want to ask you — or well I expect you — to take part in it.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows and had a hard time not laughing at the obvious attempt to brush past the involvement of Mother in this.

“I guess that’d be *my mother* expecting?” he asked dryly.

Cissy rolled her eyes, albeit with a smile. “Well, yes, of course, but you know how these things work — a wedding is a public affair and well, *you’re* the heir now, the heir to the family…”

Regulus nodded but didn’t push her to go on. He took a sip from his Butterbeer—

“… So, I’d like to ask you, alongside my father of course, to walk me down the aisle.”

—and spat it all out on the table.

“W-what?” he asked weakly.

Cissy rolled her eyes and cleaned up the mess with her wand. “It’d be very symbolic, you know, my father and the family heir — I am the last female Black to get married.”

Regulus's heart sank. He couldn’t decline — not out of loyalty for Cissy who had helped him through so much over the years and not out of fear for Mother’s wrath. But *boy*, did he like to decline. The entire wizard world in Britain — and outside even, perhaps — had its eyes set on this wedding. There’d be hundreds of people, Merlin knows how many photographers, and he was expected to be at the heart, the middle of it all…

“Cissy… don’t you think I’m a bit too young for that?” Regulus tried weakly.

“You’ll turn fifteen almost right after the wedding, you’re more mature than half the guests,” she pointed out, her voice steady with reassurance.“Besides, you’ve grown, and you’re taller than me now. Don’t worry, Reg – it’ll show that you belong.”

Regulus very much felt that he belonged *nowhere* near the aisle that would wed his cousin to Lucius, but he knew he had no choice.

So he nodded, his heart heavy and his mind already tired.

Cissy looked positively delighted and kissed his cheek enthusiastically, but then turned serious quickly.

“Now … how are things with your brother?” she asked cautiously.

Regulus shrugged. “We haven’t… talked. I have barely seen him, to be honest.”

It was true – Regulus was well aware that his brother did everything in his power to avoid him. The only time Regulus saw his brother was during meal times, and he'd sit with his back firmly towards the Slytherin table.

Cissy nodded. "Yes, it's strange, isn't it?"

Regulus shot her a puzzled look before piecing it together. *Of course,* she'd been through it as well.

"Now, we weren't at Hogwarts together when it happened," Cissy continued, her gaze distant, only half-focused on the conversation. "I don't know if it would have been easier otherwise… or maybe it was better - to not be confronted by it all the time – to be reminded of the betrayal, you know…"

Regulus didn't feel very comfortable discussing Sirius, so decided to steer the conversation to Andromeda – the Black sister who had eloped.

"You were close with her," he pointed out.

Cissy nodded. "Yes. You know, she was warm, sweet, involved, not…"

Regulus was aware of Cissy's train of thought. She was warm, sweet, involved, not a psychopathic bitch like her other sister – or well, that was Regulus's own take of things. Cissy would probably not admit thinking such a thing and most certainly would never say it aloud.

"It gets easier," Cissy said softly. "And well… it was bound to happen, wasn't it? Andy had at least been sorted into Slytherin, but Sirius… well, with *him* sorted in Gryffindor… we knew it was going to happen sometime, right?"

Regulus didn't really know whether she was comforting him or herself, but went along with it anyway. "Yes. It was only a matter of time."

Cissy, sensing his reluctance to continue discussing Sirius, nodded and fell silent.

And then it happened — like clockwork. No matter where he was or with whom, it always started the same way. An extra blink of the eye, a visible swallow of the throat, a nervous fidgeting with fingers, and then – then the conversation would shift toward the one subject Regulus wanted to avoid at all costs. At the Three Broomsticks, sitting

across from Cissy, it was no different. He felt his throat tighten at once.

“How about you, Reg?” Cissy asked, her voice lowering. “How have you been?”

Regulus didn’t answer. For a moment, he considered getting up and walking away, but he couldn’t do that – not to Cissy.

She pressed on, either oblivious or purposefully ignoring his silence. “You’ve had a rough year… everything that happened over the summer, then at Christmas…”

Regulus remained silent, staring into his Butterbeer.

“I know it’s been taking its toll on you,” Cissy continued, looking at Regulus with a concerned and investigative expression. “Do you have someone to talk to? Isa – I mean, she clearly knows something –”

This made Regulus snap to attention. “What?” he asked. “What do you mean - ‘she clearly knows something’? Have you told her — have you told her anything about–”

Cissy held her hands up defensively. “*No,* no, of course not–”

“Promise me,” Regulus shot, his voice tense. “Promise me now, Cissy, that you won’t tell a living soul – not Isa, *no one* …”

Cissy, clearly startled by his strong reaction, nodded her head excessively. “Yes, of course, Reg – I haven’t – I wouldn’t… but well, *she* mentioned she was worried…”

“When did this happen?” Regulus asked coolly.

“She owled me over the Christmas holidays,” Cissy explained. “She had heard about Sirius – now, I knew, of course, she couldn’t have heard from anyone but Potter; I mean, *you* weren’t conscious and I knew Sirius wouldn’t be either, so there was only one option… But alas – she was worried about you and well, she didn’t *mention* it but it was clear that she’d been worrying about you for quite some time…”

Regulus knew this. Isa knew something was up – he had done a horrible job hiding it.

“But she doesn’t *know* anything,” Cissy reassured. “And I haven’t said a word, of course. But, well, it can’t be easy… and I know we’ve

gotten rid of him…"

Regulus's stomach churned at the memory of the photograph – him hanging upside down, the blood drained from his body like a butchered animal… He felt positively nauseous.

"Yes," Regulus said, his voice but a whisper, for the first time actually contributing something, "but he was only part of the problem, wasn't he?"

Cissy looked taken aback, her expression revealing that she was trying to piece together what he meant. "What do you mean?"

Regulus didn't reply. Instead, he took a long sip of Butterbeer, avoiding her gaze. His hands trembled slightly, and a wave of dizziness swept over him. He needed to get out of here, oh – how he wanted to get away from here…

"Reg –" Cissy said, her eyes big in shock, "you don't – you don't blame *yourself*, do you?"

Regulus's silence was all the confirmation she needed.

"Reg!" Cissy whisper-exclaimed, leaning forward. "You were a *child*, you – you didn't do *anything* wrong, do you understand me?"

It was a rare moment in which Cissy seemed completely out of her usual composed self, her voice trembling with urgency. She grabbed Regulus by the shoulders, shaking him slightly as if trying to snap him out of a trance.

"You were a *child*, Reg," she said, searching his face for any sign of understanding, her voice laced with sadness.

Regulus had a hard time dealing with all the emotions that washed over him. He felt ashamed of the memories… all the memories, so many… He felt like he was going to choke at the memory of the picture… the pit in his stomach… *So wonderful* … And the anger - he was *furious* that Cissy had to bring it up – here, in the Three Broomsticks, throwing it in his face… He felt the anger boiling in him and just wanted to lash out, to hit something – or someone…

Regulus suddenly got up from his seat.

"This conversation's over," he said coldly. "I'll see you around Easter."

And without looking at her, he marched out of the pub, the door closing with a hard *smack*.

*****

The anger that had consumed Regulus at the Three Broomsticks didn't fade during his walk back to the castle. In fact, with every step he took, it seemed to grow, feeding on itself, burning hotter. Stupid, *stupid* Cissy bringing it up… But also *he,* he could have kept his head cool – now she *knew* he was barely holding up, she'd seen the tremble in his hands, the pallor of his face, the coldness in his eyes. She would know how close to the edge he was, how ugly things had gotten.

Oh no – and what if she contacted Isa?

Isa knew about the nightmares… And Cissy, relentless when she wanted answers, could get them from her. Isa would spill everything — the Dreamless Sleep potions, the sleepless nights, the days when food barely passed his lips. She'd tell her all of it.

He was so *angry*. Why did this need to happen? Why did this have to happen to *him* ? Why couldn't things be uncomplicated, unproblematic just for a bit? *Oh* how he wanted to punch something… He was so angry — he could hardly see straight.

Totally immersed in his thoughts, Regulus barely registered his arrival back at the castle. He'd somehow made his way to the dungeons without noticing. His fist was clenched, dragging against the cold, stone walls. Occasionally, he punched the wall, feeling the sharp sting shoot up his arm. The pain gave him a brief moment of relief, a second of numbness, but the rage came back, fiercer every time.

Why? Why him? Why not Sirius? He could have dealt with it. It wouldn't have gone so far. He would've stood up for himself.

That's why, a voice in his head whispered venomously, *he chose you because you're weak.*

Regulus slammed his fist into the wall again, not slowing his pace. His knuckles were throbbing now, bloodied from the relentless punches. It was still early — before dinner — so his friends would be out in Hogsmeade. The common room would be empty… hopefully. Surely, Isa wouldn't be there. She couldn't study all day, right? She'd have taken a break by now, wandered off to the grounds, or she'd be taking a nap in her dorm…

But no. Despite all his silent pleading, Isa was still there, seated by the fireplace when he entered the common room. As soon as she saw him, her eyes widened in alarm. She instantly got up from her seat and took in the sight of a sweating, bevelled Regulus with a bloody fist.

“Reg – are you alright?” she asked, standing quickly. “What happened?”

Regulus stopped, panic flashing in his eyes. He shook his head and swallowed before retorting. He thought about the betrayal – the prying behind his back via some letters to his cousin – no, he couldn’t *stand* her face right now. He shook his head again.

“Don’t—Ies, don’t,” he said, voice strained. “I—I can’t… don’t follow me.”

Without waiting for a response, he strode past her, heading straight for his dormitory. The door clicked shut behind him as he mechanically swapped his robes for his pyjamas. His hands were still shaking when he pulled open the drawer of his nightstand.

The familiar sight of the Dreamless Sleep potions greeted him.

Regulus pulled one vial out, uncapped it, and stared at it for a moment. It was still early. The potion wouldn’t keep him asleep until morning. He’d wake in the middle of the night, haunted by the same dark thoughts.

Fuck it.

He grabbed another vial, gave both of them a quick shake, and downed them both in one go.

Fuck it.

*****

Now, every rational and sane person knew that no good would come off taking a double Dreamless Sleep potion, but still reality hit Regulus hard the next morning – or well, day, actually.

It literally felt as if a giant had walked over him – his head was heavy and pounding, his legs felt weak and his fist was throbbing. He groaned and cursed himself and his life as he rolled over.

He had no sense of time – the light in the dormitory indicated that it

was day, and the absence of any sound whatsoever indicated that it was either meal time or late afternoon; for that is when people tended to be in the Great Hall or common room respectively. Or it was Monday already, and everyone was in class… could it be?

He knew that only a cold shower could wake him up properly in this state, so he cautiously made his way to the bathroom with a throbbing head and fist, and threw himself under the freezing water for Merlin knew how long before putting on some clothes – he couldn't decide between his robes or pants and a sweater, also because he had no idea what time it was – and then went for the sweater and pants because *fuck it, fuck it all.*

With his hair combed and his fist wrapped in a cloth to hide most of the damage his fist had endured, he reluctantly left for the common room.

He apparently guessed right – the common room was crowded, and his friends were all occupying a corner of the room, indicating that it was probably, indeed, Sunday afternoon.

"How nice of you to join us," Evan smirked. He, Barty, Severus and Avery had occupied one of the good sofas in the room.

Regulus shot him a small smile before settling down on a still empty sofa. "Yeah, had a *good* night's sleep," he joked, hoping that his eyes wouldn't betray how much he was faking his enthusiasm. Barty, Evan and Avery were gullible – Severus wasn't but knew too little to make anything of it, probably, not like Isa, who was sharp *and* well-informed, but she wasn't here–

"Hi guys."

Oh, *bollocks*.

Isa, ignoring Regulus's gaze, settled down next to him with Melania in tow. The boys all greeted them in one way or another and then continued their conversation about Thorne's last class.

"Slept well?" Isa whispered, her gaze still sternly at the group of boys across from them instead of on Regulus.

"Yeah," he whispered in a husky voice. "What day is it?"

"Sunday."

“Afternoon?”

“Yes. Four o’clock.”

Silence.

“You overdosed, didn’t you?”

He felt her eyes on him, then looked into her warm, familiar, brown eyes, although now tinged with concern.

“Yeah.”

*****

Regulus felt more or less normal during dinner – he felt a bit flat, not feeling everything as properly as he’d normally would, but he also didn’t feel the overwhelming desire to punch someone in the face or strangle someone, so he took it as a win.

He knew, though, that all the emotions from the previous day were still very much simmering at the surface and thus avoided sitting next to Isa, afraid that she might set him off with the wrong sentence.

He was content – he was still a bit drowsy from the potions, so he’d probably sleep alright that night as well, and, apart from Isa, no one of his friends knew anything about all of it and thought it was completely normal to sleep for almost twenty-four hours. Surely, nothing would get him today. The day was almost over too; chances of problems really did reduce when you woke up at four in the afternoon.

And *boy*, was he wrong.

Not feeling like waiting for Evan and Barty to finish off all the desserts on the table, Regulus decided to get back to the dormitory early. He rose from his seat, purposely ignoring Isa, and made his way to the Dungeons. All homework for the next day was finished, but perhaps he could grab his Transfiguration book and start this essay in the library…

However, before he could descend the stairs to the Dungeons, he heard a very familiar voice – one that he hadn’t heard for weeks.

“So – still best of pals with Narcissa, I see?”

Regulus froze, mid-step, his body tensing. He didn’t turn around. It’d

be better for his sanity, especially now. Still, Sirius had a knack for getting under people's skin and pushing the wrong buttons - he was very much like Mother in that way.

"How can you *still* stand her, knowing that she'll marry *Malfoy* in a matter of weeks?"

Regulus exhaled sharply, his patience wearing thin – and it was already *very, very* thin in the first place. "So?" he responded flatly, actually not sure what Sirius was driving at. He turned around to face his brother.

"So?" Sirius spat, his voice dripping with disgust. "Marrying a Death Eater – very much like her sister, don't you think?"

Regulus raised an eyebrow, his expression cool, though he could feel his anger simmering beneath the surface. "Ah," he said dryly, "and I suppose you're proud to follow her *other* sister's footsteps?" He crossed his arms, feigning to be all cold, composed and indifferent, but inside, he felt the anger in him rise – of all the reasons to start a conversation and *this* was what mattered to him? Such a trivial, stupid thing – compared to all the things clawing at Regulus's mind…

"I'd rather follow Andy than those vile witches." Sirius stepped closer, his voice growing harsher. "Have you forgotten all the sadistic, psychotic things Bellatrix used to do to us as kids? All the times she tortured us for fun?"

"Cissy is *nothing* like her," Regulus snapped, his calm veneer cracking. "You *know* she's nothing like Bellatrix. After everything she's done–"

"Everything she's done?" Sirius interrupted, closing the distance between them. His disgust was palpable, burning like a brand in his eyes. "Not everything revolves around *our governor* –"

It was as if Sirius had slapped him in the face. The governor. Bringing him up here, casually, in the Entrance Hall, like it didn't mean anything – like his *legacy* didn't mean anything.

"*Fuck you*, Sirius," Regulus hissed, stepping forward with barely restrained fury. "*Fuck you.*"

"The world is bigger than *that*, Regulus," Sirius shot back, a strange mix of anger and concern in his voice. "Just because she helped you through all of that doesn't mean–"

“You have no idea what she’s done for me,” Regulus spat, his voice trembling with rage. His fists clenched so hard his knuckles whitened.

“What do you mean?” Sirius demanded, suspicion flashing across his face. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Regulus muttered, realising too late that he’d revealed too much. His heart pounded in his chest. “Just drop it, Sirius.”

But Sirius wasn’t about to let it go. “Did they get him?” he asked urgently, his voice softer now, tinged with a curiosity that chilled Regulus to the bone. “Did they get him?”

Regulus said nothing, but his silence was answer enough.

Sirius’s expression shifted, shock and curiosity warring on his face. “They got him – what did they do to him?”

“Let it go, Sirius,” Regulus said quietly, his throat tightening as the weight of everything threatened to crush him. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, drowning in the shame and anger that tore through him like a storm.

“So that’s it,” Sirius said, his voice low, accusing. “She bought your loyalty with murder.”

Regulus couldn’t respond. His chest felt like it was about to cave in, the air thick with unspoken thoughts. He couldn’t *breathe*.

“Weak,” Sirius hissed, and that single word hit deeper than any curse ever could.

Regulus snapped.

With a snarl, Regulus seized Sirius by the collar and slammed him into the cold, hard stone of the wall. He raised his fist, and — *crack* — his knuckles met bone, the impact sharp and brutal. Blood spattered across his hand as Sirius let out a grunt of pain, clutching his face, blood dripping from his nose.

“What the *fuck*!?” Sirius roared, reeling from the blow. He stared at his brother, shock and fury flashing in his eyes as he wiped at his bloodied nose. But before Regulus could fully register what he’d done, Sirius's fist shot out, catching him off guard.

Whack. Pain exploded across Regulus’s cheek, radiating through his

skull like a lightning strike. His head snapped back, vision blurring from the impact. For a split second, everything was white-hot agony.

“Fuck!” Regulus bellowed, his voice raw with fury. He physically felt the rage rise in him – the rage that had been simmering inside him for so long that now broke free, flooding him like a tidal wave. “FUCK YOU, SIRIUS!”

With a guttural growl, he lunged again, grabbing his brother’s shoulder and hammering into him, fists flying. Sirius fought back, their bodies locked in a chaotic, violent struggle —punches landing hard, each blow fueled by years of pent-up bitterness. Their movements became frenzied, reckless, neither caring about anything but the raw, savage need to hurt each other – fighting, punching, pushing.

Regulus couldn’t see – literally blinded by the rage coursing through him, the blood – either his or Sirius’s, he had no clue at this point anymore – clouding his vision. It splattered across their faces, smeared on their clothes, dripped onto the floor. His fists ached from the relentless pounding, but the pain barely registered. Oh, it felt *so good* – punching, screaming, releasing, letting it all out…

But then, through the haze of violence, a voice cut through. “What the fuck, you guys!?”

Someone was pulling him back, strong arms yanking him away from Sirius’s crumpled form. He heard another voice, closer this time. “Stop it, Reg. Stop.” Isa’s voice—low, trembling, almost pleading.

Regulus wiped a bloody curl out of his face, his breaths coming fast and ragged as he tried to focus. His chest heaved, his heart hammering so loudly he could barely hear anything else. His body ached, bruises already forming under his skin, the pain sharp and pulsing. *Fuck,* it hurt.

Finally, his vision cleared enough to take in the scene. Potter had Sirius pinned against the wall, his hands on his shoulders, speaking to him in a low, urgent voice. Sirius looked much like Regulus —face flushed, smeared with blood, eyes wide with fury, chest rising and falling with ragged, furious breaths.

Regulus's heart was still pounding, his face throbbing where Sirius had hit him. He could feel his cheek swelling, his knuckles bruised and raw. He swayed slightly, the adrenaline starting to fade, leaving behind a dull, aching throb in his limbs.

“Reg,” Isa repeated, her voice still miraculously composed, “let’s go to the Hospital Wing.”

Regulus shook his head, wiping more blood from his face. His gaze flicked to Sirius, still glaring at him with raw hatred, chest heaving with each breath. For a moment, the brothers just stared at each other – the air between them thick with unspoken tension.

Potter turned to look at them both, his expression a strange mix of concern and discomfort, like he was witnessing something he wasn’t supposed to. “Let’s get you to the Hospital Wing, mate,” he said to Sirius, his tone awkward, unsure. He glanced between the two brothers, as if unsure whether to intervene further or step back – like he was intruding, which he, to be honest, basically was.

“No,” they said, strangely enough in unison. “I know the spells.”

*****

The following days, Regulus tried to regain his composure – he had let himself go too much too often; first with Cissy, then with Sirius in front of Isa and Potter… In front of Barty and Evan, even, for they had bursted into the dorm when Regulus was patching himself up in the bathroom with Isa whispering all kinds of concerns and advice in a low voice. Isa must have gestured them to let it go, for they had cheerfully pretended nothing had happened; meaning that they knew that it involved his brother, the only topic that no one dared to touch or come close to in any way.

He felt the worried gazes though and he was sure that Barty and Evan tried to winkle information out of Isa but well, even if she gave in, she had very little to offer. Though, Regulus knew, Isa was sharp so there was a possibility that she knew more than Regulus gave her credit for.

Still, in an attempt to appease all his friends’ minds and steer attention away from him and his problems, Regulus pretended everything was alright and nothing had happened, although the bruises on his jaw hadn’t really vanished yet and he was still rather silent and absorbed by his own thoughts and worries.

He rationally knew he was just going through a rough patch and that it took some time to process all the things that had happened, especially the past months, but at this point, it felt like he’d never laugh again, like joy was some distant, unreachable thing that he’d never feel again.

With that heaviness in his heart, he trudged to the next ASS-meeting on Thursday, reluctantly making his way to the Charms classroom on the third floor. They were still practising duelling, with McGonagall randomly pairing them up every week.

Regulus was the last to enter the classroom; the fact that Selwyn had beaten him there would've probably shocked him any other day, but today he felt nothing – just numb.

"Good evening," McGonagall greeted them, "now that everyone is here; *here* is the schedule–" she placed a piece of parchment on the teacher's desk, "-and I will be back in an hour to check on your progress like usual. And, like usual, the normal duelling rules apply."

Regulus couldn't give a rat's arse about this stupid duel practice, so even when he realised he had been teamed up with *Potter*, it didn't yield the expected mixed reaction of curiosity and irritation. Now he just shrugged as he followed the bloke to a corner of the classroom.

"You alright, Black?" Potter asked curiously, ruffling his hair.

Regulus, in no way eager for him to go all Psychohealer-Potter, sighed in exasperation. "Great, Potter."

Potter nodded, a small smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "We'll be using wands today, alright?" he said, the smirk widening. "No fists."

It took Regulus a tad too long to realise what he meant and then it was too late to suppress the small smile creeping on his lips.

"Funny, Potter."

"That'd be my middle name, Black," Potter quipped with a grin.

Regulus took the sight of his brother's best friend. He was wearing a rather tight Muggle turtleneck showing the outline of lean muscle, paired with black jeans. His hair was, as usual, a wild mess — chaotic, yet somehow suiting him perfectly.

"Ready, Black?" Potter asked, his voice laced with challenge, though the playful smirk never left his lips. "Or do you need another minute to admire the view?"

Regulus felt a flush creep up his neck and cheeks but kept his expression cool, determined not to give Potter the satisfaction of

seeing him flustered. “Let’s go, Potter.”

Potter winked, which Regulus answered with an annoyed roll of the eye before they both bowed and got into position.

Now, Regulus knew that Potter was widely considered an intelligent bloke – and there were some things that backed this theory up like the numbing cream or his performance during the first assignment – and he *did* remember Sirius pointing out that Potter had outdone him in a duel which was definitely something for Sirius was a very good dueller – so it should not have come as a surprise that the bloke was brilliant at duelling… and yet, it kind of did.

Before Regulus had even settled into his stance, Potter fired off a Disarming Charm, forcing Regulus to whip up a Protego shield with a sharp flick of his wand. His arm strained as the spell crashed against his shield, and his wand spun slightly in his hand from the force.

Fuck, that was *fast.*

Regulus threw him a Leg-Locker Curse, which Potter managed to block effortlessly, then a Stupefy, blocked again by a Protego – then Potter threw out a Tickling Charm, which Regulus just managed to barely block, and they went on and on, Regulus sweating due to the effort, being forced to jump from and to all kinds of angles and corners to dodge and block and cast – Potter was *relentless*.

His heart pounded in his chest as he ducked and darted around the room, sweat trickling down the back of his neck. Potter’s relentless assault forced him to move, jumping between angles, trying to find a moment to catch his breath…

But Potter wasn’t giving him one.

Each spell came faster than the last, and Regulus had to dig deep into his reserves just to keep up, his muscles burning with the effort. It was clear now: Potter wasn’t just playing around — he was a brilliant duelist, and Regulus, despite his own skill, was struggling to keep up with the onslaught.

“C’mon, Black,” Potter said with a mischievous smirk, biting his lip in an effort not to laugh. He looked completely unfazed by the duel. “Don’t tell me that’s all you’ve got?”

Regulus shot him a fierce glare. “Just warming up, Potter.”

Potter barked out a laugh and flicked his wand, sending a burst of blue sparks flying. Regulus didn't recognize the spell, but he managed to dodge it just in time. They were circling each other now, their spells ricocheting off the stone walls. Regulus fired off another hex, but this time Potter chose to dodge instead of block it, and the stray spell hit a stack of books. The pile exploded into a flurry of ravens, their black wings beating furiously as they cawed and scattered around the room.

"Nice, Black," Potter laughed appreciatively, then focusing again, deflecting another spell by Regulus at his feet that nearly tripped him.

Then – a fiery orange burst and Regulus barely dodged it, making the hex crash into a nearby desk, sending it flying in splinters.

Their banter and stray hexes had drawn the attention of the other group members, but Regulus had no eye for them – he saw nothing but Potter and his annoying smirk and the way he bit his lip when firing off another spell that he barely managed to dodge again.

Then, Regulus threw a Serpensortia, sending a snake slithering towards Potter, making him yelp in surprise. He quickly vanished it though, so the effects were slim.

"A snake?" Potter shot with an eye-roll. "How *original*."

They were getting more competitive now, pulling out all the stops – books were being transfigured into spiders, chairs turned into flames, only to be extinguished and transfigured again. Regulus turned a pillow into a ball of water that exploded in mid-air, nearly soaking Potter. It truly was a thrilling, exciting duel to execute and watch.

"Getting tired, Potter?" Regulus taunted, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Potter grinned, blocking another jinx effortlessly while clutching his side, trying to catch his breath. "Nah," he replied, firing another jinx with a casual flick. "Let's take it up a notch."

And they did – the spells flew faster, the chaos in the room escalating. Things burst into flames, desks exploded, books turned into flocks of paper birds, and ink bottles shattered, splattering the floor. Despite the intensity – it was fun. They laughed at each other's creative moves, appreciating each spell that was more unexpected than the last. The physical exhaustion didn't seem to matter to Regulus —he felt lighter than he had in weeks, dodging, casting, and laughing.

"Take this, Potter!" Regulus shouted, casting a spell at the cushion near Potter's feet, turning it into a massive, wriggling worm.

Potter laughed, quickly transforming it into a large snail and sending it slithering toward Regulus.

Regulus snorted and turned the snail into a splash of water, drenching both of their feet. "Not afraid of snails, Potter," he shot back.

"Sure you're not," Potter grinned. "Probably eat them for breakfast, you weird purebloods."

Regulus laughed. "This is probably more befitting of you, blood-traitor," he joked, transfiguring a quill into a cookie.

Potter roared with laughter. "No one can resist cookies, Black."

They continued, but the fact that their antics were escalating quickly seemed to go past them; a desk exploded, a chair was shot in the air, then a cushion turned into a brick wall just as Regulus fired a Confringo at it. The blast was massive — *BAM* — sending Regulus flying through the air. Before he knew it, he collided with something solid and warm — a body that wasn't his. He could feel the rapid rise and fall of someone else's chest beneath him.

"*Ouch*," Regulus groaned, too busy trying to make sense of what had happened and where he had landed to take in the fact that he was partially on top of Potter's body.

"Can't breathe, Black," Potter's voice came from somewhere below him, strained but clearly amused.

Regulus blinked and finally realised he was sprawled diagonally across Potter's body, his feet near Potter's head. Groaning, he rolled off and onto the floor, feeling the bruises already forming.

"Fuck," he muttered, glancing over to see Potter's bewildered expression. "Alright?" Regulus asked, wincing.

"Yeah," Potter groaned, still catching his breath. "Just a bit… peachy."

They locked eyes for a moment, and suddenly, the absurdity of the situation hit them. Regulus saw Potter's smirk, and it was all over— they both burst into uncontrollable laughter. Regulus tried to stop, to compose himself, but every time he looked at Potter's face, he dissolved into uncontrollable, roaring laughter again. He couldn't stop

– couldn't breathe…

"Shit, you *flew*," Potter managed between fits of laughter, which only made them both howl even louder.

Regulus clutched his side, the laughter bringing a stitch of pain, but it didn't matter. It had been so long since he'd laughed like this.

"Now… who won?" Regulus asked, attempting to put on a serious expression, but one look at Potter's startled face sent him into another bout of laughter.

It took a bloody while for them to regain their composure, oblivious to the other students in the classroom, who watched with a mix of awkwardness and amusement. Eventually, McGonagall returned, her sharp eyes surveying the wreckage. With a few quick spells, she sent the desks and chairs back to their places, repaired the cushions, and cleaned up the mess.

Potter rose from the floor first and extended a hand to Regulus. His grip was firm and warm as he pulled him to his feet.

"That was fun, Black," he smiled.

"Yeah," Regulus nodded contemplatively. "It was."

And after a while, he left the classroom, feeling lighter than he had felt in weeks.

Chapter 17: Of Gossip & Gaping

Regulus didn't have a logical explanation for it, but the anger that had consumed for weeks slowly ebbed away as Easter approached. His mind actually felt more or less at peace as long as he didn't find himself in the same room with Sirius and didn't have Isa breathing down his neck too much. Another very fortunate event that really contributed to his sense of cheer was the break-up between Barty and Amaryllis. Regulus had no clue who had ended it – with both of them claiming it was the other – but it meant that the amount of giggling in his life had subdued to a manageable level *and* it meant less of Isa and her nagging around. Not that he didn't miss her sometimes, but he felt like they had struck a healthy balance between closeness – including prying questions – and distance – including the loss of her company.

Next to this, his back had mostly healed, allowing him to fly at full strength during Quidditch practices again. It felt good to be *good* at it again and being freed of the looming anxiety of making a fool of himself before every practice.

Oddly enough, even the weekly ASS-meetings weren't too bad; Regulus enjoyed duelling, and that was essentially all they had to do. Things were going so well, in fact, that even the thought of Cissy's wedding— and the horrible role expected of him — couldn't dampen his spirits.

So, on a cheerful Friday afternoon in March, Regulus entered the common room after a short but productive study session in the library, whistling a tune. It was nearly dinnertime, and he had decided to drop off his books before heading to the Great Hall.

The common room was packed, buzzing with Slytherins passing time with games or casting playful spells while avoiding homework, since they still had two days left to worry about that.

In the far corner, Isa sat with Barty, Evan, and Melania, discussing something over what looked like the Daily Prophet. Even if Regulus hadn't been particularly observant, the way his friends awkwardly tried to hide something was painfully obvious.

Barty scratched his head awkwardly, Melania became jittery and overly enthusiastic at Regulus's arrival, and Evan kept shooting nervous glances at Isa, who gave Regulus a warm smile — though he could tell it was a diversion from the fact that she had just stuffed the

paper under her seat.

Regulus narrowed his eyes. “What’ve you got there, Nott?” he asked, nodding toward the newspaper now hidden beneath Isa.

Isa made a half-hearted attempt to play innocent. “What do you mean, Reg?”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “I’m not an idiot, Ies. Sitting on a newspaper isn't exactly a foolproof disguise.”

With a sigh, Isa pulled the paper from under her, shooting her friends a knowing look. “Told you he’d see right through it.”

She handed the paper to him — today’s issue of the Daily Prophet.

“I’ve already read this,” Regulus said, confused, half to himself. “I didn’t see anything… noteworthy.”

It was true — things had been awfully quiet in the wizarding world lately. Apart from a minor attack with no casualties, the last significant news had been about the new laws giving the Wizengamot power to intervene in the selection process of Healers at St. Mungo’s and personnel at Gringotts. Regulus, diligently reading the Prophet every day, had gone through it during breakfast and hadn't noticed anything major. So that left the question – why were his friends so *weird* about him reading the paper?

“You wouldn’t have,” Isa replied. “The … noteworthy part is in a section you normally skip.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

Then, Isa flipped the paper to the relevant page, and immediately Regulus understood—the Society Pages. Truly the most uninteresting, gossipy rubbish imaginable. He’d often wondered why a reputable paper like the Daily Prophet bothered with such a section. With a mix of curiosity and dread, Regulus began to read the article.

The Daily Prophet Society Pages
Special Correspondent: Sibylla Scornworthy

A UNION OF PRESTIGE: LUCIUS MALFOY AND NARCISSA BLACK TO WED SOON

In what promises to be one of the most elegant and talked-about occasions of the year, Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black are set to marry in just a few short weeks. The ceremony, taking place shortly after Easter, will be held at the magnificent Deadmoor Keep, the ancestral home of the Black family, nestled in the Yorkshire moors. The choice of venue is, of course, in perfect keeping with the grand traditions both families are known for, as well as the deep sense of heritage they embody.

The wedding has long been anticipated by pure-blood society, with Lucius and Narcissa considered a most fitting match — both in terms of lineage and influence. The Malfoys and the Blacks are two of the most respected wizarding families in Britain, and their union will no doubt strengthen the ties between these noble houses.

Details of the day remain largely under wraps, but whispers abound about the bride's stunning ensemble, which is expected to be a custom creation by Madam Malkin's. Narcissa is said to have chosen a gown of the finest materials, with silver-thread embroidery, a subtle nod to her family's illustrious history. Guests can expect nothing short of perfection, with the celebration sure to reflect the taste and refinement for which the couple is known.

However, what has captured the attention of some in wizarding society is the fact that this will be the first major Black family gathering following the recent rumours surrounding Sirius Black, Narcissa's cousin. Though nothing has been officially confirmed, it is widely speculated that Sirius has been quietly distanced from the family, with whispers that the younger Regulus Black may now be stepping into a more prominent role. Though both Sirius and Regulus remain students at Hogwarts, it is rumoured that Regulus will play a symbolic role at the wedding, reflecting his future standing within the family.

While these speculations are mere whispers at present, all eyes will no doubt be on the Black family to see how they present themselves during this grand occasion.

With the most distinguished names of wizarding society set to attend, the upcoming nuptials promise to be a dazzling affair. We can expect a day of unmatched sophistication, befitting two of the most influential families in the wizarding world. As always, The Daily Prophet will be on hand to report the highlights — stay tuned for full coverage as we approach the big day.

—Sibylla Scornworthy, Society Correspondent

Regulus rolled his eyes as he finished reading. What utter rubbish. Of all the things worth reporting, of all the pressing issues that actually mattered in the world — and *this* was what people chose to write about? Worse still – there were people who *voluntarily read* it?

Not that any of the information was new to him – Regulus had long understood that Cissy's wedding wasn't just about her or her moment to showcase this "powerful new union" to the world. It was also meant to be his grand debut, in a way. And yes, it was awful. And yes, he often fantasised about the entire event being called off for whatever reason. But deep down, he knew he'd have to face it sooner or later.

He had known this ever since he left Potter Manor and returned to Grimmauld Place. His role as the spare had been set in stone the moment his brother walked away. There was nothing left for him to do but accept it.

With a sigh, Regulus crumpled the paper into a tight ball and threw it into the fireplace with a final flair.

"Now — dinner?"

*****

Regulus felt a pinch of disappointment when he remembered that Friday evening meant unity dinner and that he'd be forced to sit with people from other houses. He was glad, though, when he, Barty and Evan had been ordered to sit next to a couple of older Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Knowing that fate liked to screw with him on a frequent basis, he was surprised he hadn't been seated with his brother yet and was painfully expecting that moment to come any time now. Being seated with Sirius entailed sitting with Porter as well, and Regulus couldn't make much of his antics with his brother's best friend whom he was supposed to hate — and the idea of having to play it out in front of his brother made him shudder.

The weekly mixed dinner had yielded mixed results so far; there were students that actually mingled on a frequent basis due to the dinners or, like most Slytherins at least, students who'd dutifully sit next to other students without making too much contact. Barty, Evan and Regulus were often directed to sit at another table together and so far it had been alright; they'd never been seated with Gryffindors and the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs they had ended up with so far would just stick to themselves, the 'unity' part of the dinner staying limited to sitting on the same bench without exchanging a word.

Tonight, Regulus expected the same, and he filled his plate without so much as a second glance on the group they were seated with. He was thinking about the match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff that would take place next weekend, and the rather matter-of-factly (and therefore arrogant) statement by Potter that it was a 'done deal', when–

"Hi, Regulus."

It took just a tad too long for Regulus to realise that *he* was Regulus and that one of the girls was clearly addressing *him* by his first name.

He blinked and looked up at the trio of girls across from him. He had no idea which one had greeted him – there was a blonde and two brunettes, all equally plain.

Now, he knew how to greet people, but he was a bit too taken off guard by the sudden usage of his first name, so it wasn't until Evan had kicked him painfully in his shin that he actually answered.

"H-hello," he said awkwardly, returning to his plate. He heard Barty snigger and suppressed the urge to unite his friend's head with his plate.

"We were just discussing the upcoming match," one of the brunettes said. "Who do you think is going to win?"

Regulus looked at her and blinked. *What?*

It was silent a bit too long for anyone's liking, and then Barty came to the rescue.

"Hufflepuff, of course," he said, shooting Regulus a glare that could easily be translated as *c'mon-mate-talk-to-her*.

Regulus returned him a disgruntled look. He, in no way, fancied talking Quidditch with some Ravenclaws and a Hufflepuff. Besides, Barty was clearly wrong – Gryffindor would most definitely win. They had Potter on the team, after all.

"They might," Regulus said stiffly anyway.

When the girls apparently came to the realisation that the topic of Quidditch didn't spike enough interest in Regulus to actually talk to them, one of the Ravenclaws tried a different approach.

“How are classes with Thorne?” she asked, eyeing Regulus intensively as she twirled a curl around her finger.

Regulus blinked again. “Err – good, I guess?”

Evan snickered into his chicken drumsticks, which Regulus answered with a swift kick under the table.

“Rumour has it you’re *really* good at Defence,” the Hufflepuff chimed in.

“Err – I guess,” Regulus muffled, taking an awkward bite of his potatoes. The thought struck him that he might actually take after his father – about as skilled at making conversation as he was. Shit.

“You’re competing in the Duel Gauntlet, right?” the third girl, another Ravenclaw, said.

Regulus nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re *so* going to win,” the first Ravenclaw said confidently. “I feel it.”

Regulus blinked again, tempted to ask how one could ‘feel’ such a thing until he saw Evan’s impatient look.

“There’s a lot of sixth- and seventh-years taking part,” he decided to point out. “They’ve got more experience.”

“Yes, but you beat *Thorne* in a duel,” the Hufflepuff continued.

Regulus was about to retort something to point out that he hadn’t actually beat him the conventional way, when Barty cut him off. “Yes, Regulus is really an *exceptionally* gifted duellist.”

Regulus eyed his friends from the corner of his eyes. Barty smirked contendly.

“We just started on the Patronus Charm,” the brunette Ravenclaw said with a heavy sigh. “But I don’t think I’ll ever get the hang of it.”

Evan put down his spoon gleefully. “Well – *Regulus* can perform a Patronus.”

The girls gasped in awe, with the Hufflepuff adding an exaggerated squeal to it. Merlin, were they *annoying*. Regulus was once again reminded why he didn’t bother hanging around with girls other than

Isa and Cissy.

“Yes, what was it again?” Barty continued, still wearing that annoying smirk. “Some kind of bird–”

“An owl,” Regulus shot him irritatedly. It had been some time since he last tried it, though – he mastered it in competition with Isa in their third year – and he actually wondered whether he’d be able to pull it off. He hadn’t managed it during the relay, after all…

“Oh, Regulus, could you perhaps help me out?” the brunette Ravenclaw asked hopefully.

Regulus’s eyes widened in panic. No, no – he definitely did *not* want to help any of them out with anything.

“Of course he will,” Barty grinned before Regulus could say anything voicing his opposition. He clapped him heartily on the back. “You’re free Monday evenings, right, *Regulus*?”

“Oh, that’d be *amazing*!” the girl squealed, already rising from her seat. She mentioned for her friends to follow. “See you at seven at the library?”

And before Regulus could even answer, the girl winked and walked off with the other two trailing behind her.

What?

*****

Unfortunately, the awkward encounter with the girls over Unity Dinner wasn’t an isolated event. Over the weekend, he somehow kept running into different girls – most of whom he was sure he’d never seen before – who somehow felt comfortable enough to strike up conversations and call him by his first name.

There was a fourth-year Hufflepuff who insisted on walking him to the Castle after Quidditch practice on Saturday, there were two girls very annoyingly hovering around him in the library on Sunday morning and far too many pairs of eyes watched him as he made his way to the Slytherin table that evening.

He sat down next to Barty and Evan, and across from them were Melania and Isa – the latter of whom he had barely seen over the weekend.

Barty and Evan exchanged glances, looking over their shoulders at one of the girls at the Hufflepuff table before breaking into fits of laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Melania asked.

“Oh, *Regulus*,” Evan chuckled, “you’re *so* smart–”

“*So talented* on the pitch,” Barty chimed, laughing even harder.

“Sure you have *other talents* too, right?” Evan added in a high-pitched voice, mimicking an imaginary girl.

“Let’s meet up at the library and find out!”

Regulus felt his cheeks heat up and shot his friends a fierce glare. “Shut up.”

Isa shot Regulus a questioning look, one which he desperately tried to avoid now he was sure that his face was an embarrassing shade of scarlet. “What are they on about?” she asked.

“Black has a *date* tomorrow,” Evan said very smugly.

“With a *sixth-year* Ravenclaw,” Barty added with another loud bark of laughter. He clapped his hands gleefully and began loading his plate with food.

“It’s not a date!” Regulus snapped.

“What?” Isa asked, her brows furrowing. “With *who*?”

All eyes fell on him, which didn’t really help his flustered state, and he awkwardly took a bite from his lamb sticks. He opened his mouth and then the realisation struck him: he had *no bloody clue* .

“Err,” he scratched his head awkwardly. “I don’t know, actually…”

This earned him another round of laughter from Barty and Evan who looked positively thrilled by the current developments.

“It’s that Fairweather girl,” Evan pointed out.

“*Audrey* Fairweather?” Melania gasped, in surprise. Regulus had no idea how to interpret her apparent shock.

“Apparently,” Regulus said dryly. “But again – it’s not a date. She asked for help with Defence–”

Evan and Barty broke out in sniggers again. “An *amazing* duellist–”

“‘Can you help me conjure a Patronus, *Reggie*? Help me hold my wand, will you?’”

“Oh, *fuck off*,” Regulus shot his friends angrily, punching them both in the arms. “We didn’t even discuss it being a date or anything, so surely she knows–”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Isa shot, her tone sharp. “It’s *Audrey Fairweather*.”

Again, Regulus had no idea what that emphasis entailed.

“Okay?” he asked, puzzled.

“It will be fun, Black,” Evan grinned. “You might, you know, end up snogging–”

Regulus choked on his food. *What*?

“With a *sixth-year*,” Barty roared, pounding the table with glee.

Regulus froze in panic. Snogging? He didn’t even know her *name*!?

“I think the real question here,” Isa chipped in rather stiffly, “is whether Regulus actually *wants* to snog her.”

“Oh, c’mon, you killjoy,” Barty shot her irritably. “*Sure* he does – and even if he doesn’t – a good snog just to you know – get it over with– doesn’t even have to like her–”

“You *do* realise that they’re only after you because of all the rumours concerning the wedding, right?” Isa shot, turning to Regulus.

Regulus couldn’t explain it properly, but somehow the statement felt like a slap in his face.

Oooh.

“No, they aren’t,” Evan said, quickly coming to Regulus’s defence. “Black’s a popular bloke.”

“He has the hair *and* the eyes,” Barty pointed out with a smirk.

“And the mysterious air,” Melania noted matter-of-factly.

Regulus felt very self-conscious when they all stared at him.

“You’re going then?” Isa asked coldly.

Regulus didn’t want to – especially now that it turned out he was probably expected to *snog* her – but it was satisfying to get a rise out of Isa and he felt oddly offended by Isa’s previous comment.

“Yes,” he said. “Perhaps it’ll be fun.”

Barty and Evan whistled in approval.

*****

It turned out that it wasn’t fun. Audrey Fairweather, despite being a Ravenclaw, was surprisingly shallow and, quite frankly, daft. At least daft enough to believe that Regulus would fall for the act of not knowing how to hold her wand properly, flick it the right way, or even think of a happy memory for a Patronus. She was a *Ravenclaw* and a sixth-year, so she surely knew how to conjure up a Patronus. At some point, her attempts for bodily proximity grew so obvious that it actually turned Regulus’s stomach. He really, *truly* had no interest in snogging her. But he also had a very hard time pointing that out – especially with his friends’ teasing in mind.

So he resorted to the only strategy he could think of without embarrassing himself—he pretended to be even more daft than she was. Every time she made a move, he found an excuse to shift away, whether it was reaching for a book or adjusting his chair. This continued until the library slowly emptied, and Fairweather, sensing there was nothing left for her to linger over, finally gave up.

Unfortunately, the girl was persistent.

“You think we could try again sometime? Or help me with other homework?” she asked sweetly.

Regulus highly doubted that a girl two years his senior needed *his* help with *her* homework.

“I am kind of busy this week,” he tried – pathetically so.

“You surely have a night off this week?” she pressed, her eyebrows raised.

“A lot of Quidditch practices, unity meetings…”

“Well, what about the weekend? Sunday?”

Regulus sighed and before he could muster the courage to turn her down – if he had been able, in the first place – she smiled, turned on her heels and walked away, leaving him behind, dumbstruck.

Oh fuck.

*****

The rest of the week progressed without any major incidents – Regulus had to dodge some girls here and there, including the blonde Hufflepuff and the other brunette Ravenclaw from the Unity Dinner, but that was the worst of it. He was on top of most of homework and he had managed to survive on only one night of Dreamless Potion-induced sleep, so he felt that life was actually sort of working out for him. He purposely pushed the reminders of the looming wedding aside, though, for thoughts about that managed to dampen even the highest spirits.

Easter holidays were only a little over a week away – which meant that the Duel Gauntlet would take place after the weekend. Thursday’s final practice had gone alright - he had been paired with Khan, a decent dueller but not nearly as good as Potter. He hadn’t been paired with him anymore, probably out of concern for the state of the Castle, which had actually come as kind of a disappointment – at least duelling against Potter was a challenge.

At the end of practice, McGonagall had reminded them to assemble on Saturday evening for the duel schedule, which would be announced for Monday. Regulus groaned at the prospect—it was going to be a mixed event, meaning that all the groups would be there. The Great Hall would be set up with multiple duelling corners, and all the ‘champions’ would be able to watch each other’s matches.

As opposed to Regulus, Potter seemed to actually like the idea, but was gruntled instead by something else.

“Meeting on *Saturday*,” he complained as they left the Charms classroom. “Right in the middle of the victory party.”

Regulus snorted. “You look very confident it’s going to be a victory party.”

Potter smirked. “Sure it is – we’re playing Hufflepuff.”

Regulus agreed, but didn't let it show. "You never know."

"Now, have a little faith in me, Black," Potter smirked. "I don't rememb–"

Potter couldn't finish his sentence though, for, *very* unfortunately, he was cut off by some high-pitched and annoying shrieks that were supposed to be a means of greeting.

"*Regulus*!"

Oh no. Not this – not *now*. Regulus turned around slowly, finding himself face-to-face with Audrey Fairweather, her brunette Ravenclaw friend, and the blonde Hufflepuff from unity dinner.

"*There* you are!" the Hufflepuff exclaimed. "We were looking for you,"

Potter, now leaning casually against the wall, folded his arms and made no attempt to hide his smirk.

Regulus sighed. "You were?" he asked, scratching his head.

"Yes," the Hufflepuff continued. "Audrey finally managed to conjure her Patronus, thanks to you—"

Good news; perhaps now they would leave him alone –

"So I was wondering whether *you* could help me out maybe? Tomorrow? In the library?"

Regulus heard Potter stifle a laugh, still casually leaning against the wall and taking in the scene with interest.

"Err," Regulus started, "can't – unity meeting… Sorry…"

"How about Sunday?" she pressed.

Before he could answer, Fairweather snapped, "He's already meeting me on Sunday, right, *Reg*?"

Regulus flinched at the nickname. *Reg*. And still, he had a very hard time finding the words to turn all three of them down – because that is what he wanted to do. He didn't fancy helping any of them with anything, and he desperately wanted them to leave him alone. Still, with Barty's and Evan's words in his head and the slightly pathetic desire not to come across as an unlikable bloke in front of Potter, he did not do such a thing and instead decided to go for the middle way.

“It’s a busy week,” he said cautiously, “with all the Unity stuff. But I’ll let you know… later?”

The Hufflepuff beamed. “Sure, Reg.”

Fairweather didn’t look too pleased but didn’t say anything and instead directed her friends away from him after a wave – probably afraid that the other Ravenclaw would end up with a date with Regulus too if they chose to linger.

The second they rounded the corner, Potter burst into laughter.

“You’re dating *Fairweather*?” he laughed. “*Audrey Fairweather*?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Regulus shot, feeling oddly out of tune with everyone for it was the umpteenth time someone seemed to imply *something* with that, but no one properly explained what it was supposed to mean.

“Nothing,” Potter said appeasingly right away, “it’s just – she’s a sixth year…”

“You wouldn’t say,” Regulus shot him sarcastically.

“And well … she’s been … around… you know.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows, trying to figure out whether ‘around’ entailed what he thought it entailed…

“It’s just, you don’t seem like the type to fancy that kind of girl.”

Regulus was instantly reminded of both Sirius and Lucius, each calling him a "classic type."

“I don’t,” Regulus sighed.

“So why go on a date with her?”

Regulus refrained from explaining it wasn’t technically a date. “...for the fun of it?” he tried.

Potter gave him a long, contemplative look. “Yeah,” he said slowly, “you don’t really seem like that kind of bloke either.”

Regulus wanted to throw something nasty in his face, but was cut off by Potter who spoke again. “But hey – have fun! I gotta go – Baiss will kill me if I miss the second half of practice…”

Regulus nodded.

“You’ll be there Saturday, right?” Potter smirked before rounding the corner as well. “Cheering me on?”

Regulus snorted.

*****

It turned out Potter was right. Gryffindor naturally won the match easily — or well, it wouldn’t turn out that ‘easy’ for Potter in the end, but they had won either way.

After breakfast on the day of the match, Regulus made his way to the Slytherin stands with Barty, Evan and Isa. It felt odd, almost melancholic to be accompanied by the three of them — now that Amaryllis and Barty had broken up and the two avoided each other like the plague, Isa’s time was split between Amaryllis and Melania or Regulus, Evan and Barty. Today she had chosen her male friends and she was chatting happily with Evan about the upcoming Easter holidays.

Soon enough, Madam Hooch’s whistle pierced the air and she’d just thrown the Quaffle in the air – and Potter had scored.

Regulus was dumbstruck — this was probably a record — the bloke had managed to score within *seconds.*

The Gryffindor stands erupted into wild cheers, accompanied by the roaring of several enchanted lion hats. Regulus glanced sideways at his friends, knowing they tended to be all awkward and cautious when it came to Potter and especially when it came to praising him.

Really, people that argued Slytherins weren’t loyal clearly hadn’t met Evan and Barty.

Because even the most fervent hater of Potter couldn’t deny the fact that Potter was a bloody genius on a broom. Seriously, the way he soared through the air with effortless grace, carving through the sky like he belonged to it, well, it made Regulus grudgingly marvel. He darted through the clouds as if gravity simply forgot him, catching and tossing the Quaffle with a casual flick of his wrist, throwing it through the loops without as much as a drop of sweat – it was like flying was his second nature, a graceful dance – it definitely was a form of magic…

Hufflepuff had clearly adopted the same strategy Slytherin used against Gryffindor: find the Snitch as quickly as possible before Gryffindor could establish a 150-point lead. And looking at the brilliant cooperation between Potter and the Macmillan sisters, that would probably be soon. Regulus turned his attention to Bones, the Hufflepuff Seeker, who was darting nervously around the pitch. He couldn't blame him, really, he had been in his position just a few months ago… And then, in the corner of his eye, he saw Potter again, speeding through the air and it was hard to keep his eyes off him.

Regulus tried his best to look at the game as a whole — he felt a sense of dread when he saw his brother tossing a cheeky wink toward Potter and flying in the air without a single care in the world — but it was hard to keep his eyes off Potter who truly was the star of the game. And well, he *was* in possession of the Quaffle awfully often, thereby drawing the attention of nearly everyone to himself all the time.

Whereas Regulus thought it was a done deal, it would eventually turn out to be a rather suspenseful game after all. It was a matter of time — less than an hour even — before Gryffindor was leading with 140 points. Two more goals and it wouldn't even matter if Bones managed to get his hands on the Snitch. The tension was palpable, every spectator on the edge of their seat or tips of their toes.

"And there he goes — Potter's got the Quaffle again! You don't see players like him often, do we? And—HE SCORES! 180-30 to Gryffindor!" the announcer boomed. "If Bones finds the Snitch now it will still be a draw!"

The Gryffindor stands again erupted in loud cheers while Sirius clapped Potter's back supportively. Potter grinned from ear to ear, his gaze sweeping across the stands, from the Gryffindor crowd to Ravenclaw, slowly past the Hufflepuffs and then — a quick glaze of recognition, the twinkling eyes, a biting of his lip that indicated he had seen him too… and, unwillingly, the muscles in Regulus's mouth were uncontrollable, twitching into a small grin…

Just as quick as it had happened, he broke eye contact, soaring off into the sky.. Regulus, a bit startled by this subtle exchange, did so too and let his eyes go over the rest of the pitch, to the Hufflepuff Seeker.

And then, Bones dived — he had clearly seen *something*. Or was it just a diversion? He'd be desperate by now; this was most probably the only moment Hufflepuff would at least not lose; a draw was better than losing… They stood no chance against Potter and the Quaffle.

Regulus, his eyes trained to spot the tiny golden ball, was among the first to see it; Bones had indeed spotted the Snitch. Regulus gasped — would it? Would he?

The stands fell deathly silent as multiple things unfolded at once: Bones racing toward the Snitch, Potter speeding toward the hoops, and the Bludger nearing the Hufflepuff Beater's bat… *oh no*.

It was quick — so quick that he couldn't make sense of it all; what happened first? Who was quicker?

Potter raised his arm, ready to throw the Quaffle, his eyes squeezed in concentration…

Bones's eyes too were squeezed, his arms stretched in desperation…

And the Beater, bat raised, ready to swing the Bludger toward Potter…

"And — Potter SCORES!"

And then-

"And Bones catches the Snitch! What a game, folks — Hufflepuff catches the Snitch, but Gryffindor wins!"

The Gryffindor stands erupted in wild celebration – cheers, roars and laughter echoed through the stadium. Regulus clenched his fist in a small victorious gesture, whispering, "*Yes*," under his breath.

Too caught up in the excitement, he didn't notice Isa's sharp eyes on him. His gaze drifted back to Potter, who looked equally relieved and delighted. But then, Regulus spotted it — the Bludger, still hurtling through the air, making a beeline for Potter's head.

"*No*," Regulus gasped, heart plummeting. No — stop the victory lap, Potter, stop it!

But before he could do anything—

WHACK.

The Bludger hit Potter square in the face. He was knocked clean off his broom, spiralling uncontrollably through the air, twisting and tumbling, tumbling, tumbling as he plummeted toward the ground.

*****

The rest of the afternoon was filled with endless chatter about Quidditch – Slytherin's chances now that Gryffindor had won another match, the upcoming showdown between Hufflepuff and Slytherin… The discussions quickly became repetitive, especially since everything still hinged on the final match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, leaving plenty of speculation but no real answers. And well, hearing the same points rehashed in different words grew rather boring. Besides, he was truly annoyed by his friends' obvious attempts to downplay Potter's talent on the pitch like Regulus was a sensitive fool, *and* Barty and Evan suggestively hinting at Regulus's meeting with Fairweather the day after, which was growing rather boring too.

So, he was almost relieved to get a break from all of that as he got to the Charms classroom to get the last instructions on the assignment for Monday.

As per tradition, they waited for Selwyn to arrive last, and as Potter was still in the Hospital Wing, it was a rather awkward ordeal to just stand there with Khan, Thompson, McGonagall and an overly enthusiastic Coolidge.

When Selwyn finally arrived, McGonagall handed out the duel schedule. Regulus's first opponent was a girl named Bertha Jorkins. He glanced at Isa's name and saw she'd be duelling Marlene McKinnon. Curiosity got the better of him, and he couldn't resist checking Potter's opponent—he'd be facing Edgar Bones, the Hufflepuff Seeker. He couldn't suppress the urge to snort to himself.

He had been so absorbed in the schedule that Regulus completely missed McGonagall's instructions until her sharp voice cut through his thoughts.

"Mr. Black?"

He snapped his attention back to the professor's stern face.

"Err — yes, Professor?"

"You will deliver the schedule to Mr. Potter?"

Oh.

"Yes, of course, Professor," he replied stiffly, accepting the additional piece of parchment.

The meeting was over almost as soon as it began—waiting for Selwyn

had taken longer than the meeting itself, and it didn't escape Regulus that this entire gathering could have been avoided by simply posting the schedule in the common rooms. Irritated by this complete waste of time, he made his way toward the Dungeons, ready to call it a day, when he suddenly remembered he had to drop off the schedule with Potter. With a sigh, he considered his options – Potter was definitely still in the Hospital Wing – no way that Madam Pompfrey would let him, with that blow to the head, attend the victory party that would undoubtedly be in full swing at the moment. He could go now… with a slight chance of a run-in with his brother… Or, he could wait until tomorrow, but that'd mean hunting him down in the middle of a crowded mealtime… No, it'd better be now.

So, reluctantly, Regulus made his way to the Hospital Wing. He paused to take a deep breath before pushing the doors open, hoping that Potter would be alone. And for once, his luck had held – Potter didn't have any visitors and he was the only patient in the room.

Potter looked up as Regulus approached, his expression puzzled. Regulus, feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious, walked toward the bed where Potter sat, halfway down the left side of the room.

He didn't appear too worse for wear—no visible bruising, just a bandage over his unruly hair. He was sitting up, reading a book, and stared at Regulus with mild confusion as he approached.

"Black," he greeted, visibly confused. "What a surprise."

Regulus nodded. "Potter."

Silence.

Then, suddenly Regulus remembered why he was there. "McGonagall wanted you to have… this." He handed over the schedule.

Potter smirked as he glanced at it. "Ah, Bones is going to be *thrilled*. Ah – you're up against Jorkins? That's a win for you for sure."

Regulus shifted uncomfortably, not having anticipated the possibility of small talk. His mind had been preoccupied with the thought of running into his brother, not the reality of standing here alone with Potter. Now that he was here, all alone with him, he didn't really know what to talk about – or whether he should talk about anything at all. Should he just leave?

"I don't know her," Regulus responded, a bit stiffly.

“She’s a bit daft – definitely not a good dueler,” Potter pointed out.

Regulus nodded again.

“So tell me,” Potter continued with a playful grin, “did you cheer for me?”

Regulus’s mind flashed briefly to his reaction during the final goal.

“Ha!” Potter laughed triumphantly. “You did, didn’t you? I *knew* you would!”

Potter laughed – not the mischievous smirk Regulus was accustomed to – but the kind that stretched from ear to ear, lighting up the entire room.

Regulus arched an eyebrow. “Potter – are you high?”

Potter let out another loud laugh which he, measuring from his wincing and groaning, immediately regretted. “I might be. Pomfrey’s given me all sorts of potions. Broken skull—but she says I’ll be good as new by tomorrow.”

Regulus nodded, about to turn and leave, when Potter pointed to the chair near his bed.

“Why don’t you stay for a bit?” he suggested. “Unless you’ve got a victory party to attend?”

Regulus snorted. “Not really a victory for Slytherin, was it?”

Potter shrugged, a smirk appearing on his face. “I wouldn’t say that – the fact that I broke my skull must count as a victory for Crouch, Rosier, Avery and the like.”

Regulus let out a surprising bark of laughter.

It felt a bit odd sitting down with the bedridden Potter, but decided to go along with it anyway. Luckily, Potter was an easy conversationalist, as opposed to Regulus.

“Come on, humour me,” Potter smirked. “How’s things going with Fairweather?”

Regulus groaned. “Do we have to talk about *that*?”

“Yes, or the other girls – Diana Dellawire and Natasha Gibson –”

“Who?”

Potter raised an eyebrow slowly. “The other two girls – you surely know their names, right? You’re meeting with Gibson after all…”

Oh – the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

“Didn’t know their names,” Regulus admitted.

“You really don’t know many people, do you?” Potter snorted. “So, what’s it going to be? Fairweather or Gibson? Who’s going to steal your heart?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, exasperated. He’d barely escaped this conversation with Barty and Evan, and now Potter was bringing it up as well?

“Neither of them, obviously,” he said stiffly.

“Why bother dating then?”

“It’s not a *date* – just meeting up in the library–”

“Do *they* know it’s just a date?” Potter asked, raising an eyebrow.

Regulus shrugged. “We never *said* it was a date.”

Potter laughed. “Alright, so you like Fairweather... just as a friend?”

Regulus shot him a sharp glare. “No, I don’t like Fairweather at all. Or the other two.”

Potter laughed again, clearly confused by the whole situation. Regulus could relate — he didn’t fully understand it either.

“Then why meet them at all?”

“I don’t know!” Regulus snapped, irritation creeping into his voice. “They tricked me into it — Barty and Evan were involved. And clearly, they just want me to snog her—”

“Well,” Potter cut him off, “the real question is, do *you* want to snog her?”

Regulus paused, the strange irony of Potter echoing Isa’s exact words not lost on him. He sighed. “No, I don’t.”

“Well, then it’s pretty simple, isn’t it?” Potter said matter-of-factly. “You’ve got a date to cancel.”

Regulus shot him a puzzled look.

“Black — or Regulus, can I call you Regulus?”

“No.”

Potter suppressed a grin. “Alright, *Black*. Look, you should never—” his tone shifted to something more serious, “—do things you don’t want to do, especially… these kinds of things.”

Regulus blinked in surprise. Of all the people to give him life advice, Potter was the last person he’d expect. He stayed silent, unsure whether to take it seriously, but Potter pressed on.

“I mean, if you *want* to snog her, just for fun, go for it. But don’t do it just because other people think you should.”

The contrast between Potter’s advice and what Barty and Evan had been pushing him toward was another notion not lost on him. It was strange, almost unsettling, to hear this perspective.

“And,” Potter added, “don’t forget… these girls might be after you because of your ‘new position’ and the event you’re attending next week.”

Regulus glared at him. It was Isa all over again with her *they’re-just-interested-because-of-the-wedding* crap.

Potter caught the annoyance and quickly defended himself. “No, no, don’t get me wrong. You’ve got a lot going for you — I mean, you’re talented at plenty of things. And… you know, you’re handsome—” Regulus shifted uncomfortably, avoiding Potter’s gaze, “—so they should like you for *that*, not just because of some moment of fame.”

Despite the odd flutter in his stomach at Potter’s words, Regulus snorted. “You sound old and wise, Potter.”

Potter burst out laughing. “Yeah, well, it’s almost identical to the advice my mum gave me once.”

Regulus couldn’t help but smile — a real, unguarded smile. “You must have a nice mother.”

Potter nodded, his expression softening as his eyes met Regulus’s,

deep brown and sincere. There were so many unspoken truths and thoughts between them that it made Regulus swallow hard.

“Yeah,” Potter said quietly, “she’s the best.”

Chapter 18: Of Duels & Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the Monday of the Duel Gauntlet, Regulus woke up unusually cheerful. He was sure the Gauntlet would be alright – thinking about the course the relay had taken, he knew it couldn't be much worse; the worst that could happen now was being disarmed by that daft Jorkins girl in the first round, and compared to the Boggarts and the Dementors, that wouldn't be a complete disaster. He was loathing the prospect of Cissy's wedding, naturally because he had to walk her down the aisle, but also because the sparse contact between him and his cousin had been very stiff – to be expected after their last encounter, obviously. But even the prospect of the cameras, stiff robes that would leave him barely able to move, or Mother's claws in the entire ordeal couldn't really dampen his mood; he reminded himself that in less than two weeks time it would be finally over and done with. Just two weeks, and he'd never have to think about that stupid wedding ever again.

Besides that, he'd had a good night's sleep after taking a Dreamless Potion, and since he managed to take it only once a week—and probably had some resistance to it by now—there wasn't much of the usual drowsiness. Sure, it also meant that it didn't work entirely against the nightmares anymore, but at least they were nothing like the vivid horrors of other nights. Even the dreams seemed to be losing their sharp edges, so yes, things were alright. The last week at Hogwarts before the break would likely pass without any major incidents, and with professors rounding up their lessons, there would be plenty of free time.

And *boy*, was he about to be proved wrong once again.

"You look cheerful," Melania noted as Regulus sat down at the Slytherin table for breakfast. She and Amaryllis were early, the only fourth-years at the table.

Regulus shrugged and poured porridge into his bowl. "Not particularly. Where's Isa?"

Amaryllis shrugged. "She said she wanted to practise before breakfast. We woke up early to eat together, but she was already gone."

“Practise?” Regulus asked. “She’s up against Silvermire–”

“A sixth-year,” Melania interjected.

“Yes, who’s very capable on a broomstick but *lousy* with a wand,” he pointed out matter-of-factly. “Isa will crush her.”

Amaryllis and Melania exchanged looks, clearly not understanding what Regulus meant – which was weird, because surely they knew this?

“C’mon,” he added, implying it should be obvious. “Isa’s a *brilliant* dueller—she might even win the whole thing.”

They smirked, and whatever silent joke passed between them completely went over his head – frankly, Isa was hard to understand sometimes, but she was an open book compared to these two, especially when they teamed up.

“So, have you got a date for the wedding yet?” Melania asked, her tone taking on that annoying, gossipy edge.

Regulus shot her a sharp look. *This* again? “No,” he answered curtly.

“Fairweather’s off the table?” Amaryllis asked.

“She was never on the table, Greengrass,” Regulus retorted. “Neither were the other two.”

Yesterday, bolstered by Potter’s advice, Regulus had finally gathered the courage to tell Fairweather and her friends that he didn’t have time to tutor anyone. Sure, it would have been more courageous if he’d just plainly pointed out that he didn’t want to date any of them, but well, this would lead to less drama anyway…

“So who are you taking to the wedding, then?” Amaryllis pressed.

“I don’t have to take anyone,” Regulus sighed – really, did they have to ruin breakfast with this stupid conversation? He had Merlin knows how many duels ahead after breakfast and they wanted to bother him with this?

Regulus quickly shoved some spoonfuls of porridge down his throat, eager to end this little gathering soon.

“Sure you do,” Melania pointed out, slightly puzzled. “It’s custom – you can’t show up alone; especially if you’re assigned such an

important role…"

That stopped him mid-chew. He looked up, stunned.

"W-What?" he stammered.

Amaryllis nodded. "Yes – *we* thought you'd just go with Isa, you know…"

Regulus blinked – that would've been the obvious choice. Why hadn't he thought of that? It would've spared him the awkward encounters with Fairweather and the others.

"But since, after all this time, you *haven't* asked her yet, meaning you *obviously* have a crush on her–"

Regulus froze, his spoon clattering to the table. "W-What?"

"It's the only explanation," Melania chimed in, as though it was the most logical thing instead of the world's most ridiculous analysis. "You're just working up the nerve to ask her out."

"W-What?"

Merlin, was he original today…

Before he could voice anything disposing the world of the new round of rumours that he fancied Isa, the girl in question sat down across from him, a wide smile on her face and greeting everyone. Regulus took in her pretty face – a bit flustered, and … oddly enough, a bit suspicious when they interlocked gazes.

Oh no - did *she* think he fancied her?

From the corner of his eye, he caught Amaryllis and Melania exchanging smug looks.

Oh *no*…

*****

An hour after breakfast, the 'champions' gathered in the Great Hall. The teachers had cleared the long tables, transforming the space into four duelling areas, each corner of the Hall marked off to provide the competitors with enough room for their matches. Regulus, with his last duel with Potter in mind, thought this was rather bold, but alas.

Around the duelling platforms, seats were scattered for the other contestants to watch when they weren't competing. Barty and Evan, having two hours off in the morning, had been very disgruntled by the fact that the Great Hall was closed off to students not partaking in the project. Regulus was actually quite glad with this as he in no way desired duelling in front of the entire school – especially after all the wild stories following his duel with Thorne. He in turn, had been disgruntled by the fact they had to stay with their assigned groups. He'd hoped to spend the day with Isa, but instead, he was stuck with his own group when their members were up for their duels.

Though, he had Potter, and strangely enough, that made for rather pleasant company.

"Ah, Black," Potter greeted him cheerfully as Regulus settled on a pouffe in the left corner of the Hall. "Finally — the big day."

"You sound like you've been looking forward to this," Regulus remarked.

Potter shrugged. "I never say no to a duel — and I've got some nice bets going."

Regulus bit his lip, trying not to laugh. "Bets?"

Potter nodded seriously, leaning in as though sharing a secret. "Yeah, some people think it'll take me half an hour to take down Bones. Others are betting he'll beat me instead."

"You're betting on yourself, then?"

Potter grinned, clapping his hands excitedly when McGonagall called his name. "I bet I'll take him down in under three minutes."

Regulus snorted. Really, the level of confidence Potter had was something else completely. But as the duel began, Regulus quickly realised Potter's bet wasn't all that far-fetched. Every spell Bones sent was effortlessly deflected, and it was clear Potter was holding back, drawing out the duel to have some fun. He reminded Regulus of a predator toying with its prey — but in a fun, playful way.

"How long, Black?" Potter called out, blocking a jinx with a casual flick of his wand.

"Two and a half minutes," Regulus replied with an exaggerated eye roll.

“Nice,” Potter smirked. “Playtime’s over.”

True to his word, ten seconds later, Potter disarmed Bones with a flourish, catching his opponent’s wand mid-air and twirling it before handing it back with a cheeky wink. He returned to Regulus, still beaming.

“See?” Potter said. “Five Galleons richer in under three minutes.”

Regulus couldn’t stifle a laugh and shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“You should have more faith in me, Black,” Potter said, eyes twinkling. “I’ve got faith in you. In fact, I’ll be cheering you on today, just to show you how friendly competition works.”

Regulus shot him a withering look, only to be interrupted by McGonagall beckoning him forward. “Well, you can start now — I’m up.”

“How many minutes?” Potter called after him, eyes sparkling with amusement.

Regulus turned back, puzzled. “What?”

“How many minutes to take down Jorkins?” Potter clarified, as though it were an obvious question.

“Five,” Regulus replied, his voice firm.

“Alright,” Potter grinned, settling in for the show.

*****

It turned out that watching duels with Potter was actually rather fun – Potter was incredibly animated, narrating every move with dramatic flair, adding a special touch to the spectacle. On top of that, he seemed to have made it his mission to educate Regulus on their fellow students’ lives, a process that, in reality, was just vile, shameless gossiping under the guise of ‘social education’.

“So – who’s that?” Regulus asked, pointing at a seventh-year currently duelling Frank Longbottom, the Gryffindor prefect, at the far end of the Hall. Their own group wasn't competing at the moment, leaving them free to observe other duels and broaden their gossip horizons.

“Ah,” Potter said, “that’d be Alice Fortescue.”

The duel between Fortescue and Longbottom was easily the most exciting one so far - both were clearly skilled, their spells crackling through the air with precision and force. Many other students had shifted their attention away from their own housemates, now absorbed in the back-and-forth between the two seventh-years.

“They’re a couple,” Potter added. “Longbottom and Fortescue. To be honest, I’ve no idea who’s going to win; they’re both relentless.”

Regulus nodded. So much was obvious.

“But, you know, Longbottom’s a bit of a gentleman – he might let her win.”

Sure enough, not long after, Fortescue managed to overpower Longbottom, disarming him with a flourish that sent his wand spinning through the air. Regulus smirked as Longbottom offered her a gracious bow, his smile never faltering despite the loss.

“See?” Potter laughed. “Told you. He probably let her win.”

Their attention shifted to a less riveting duel between Flint and Severus’s Mudblood girlfriend. It was clear that the Mudblood was far more capable than Flint, who wasn’t known for her duelling prowess.

“You’re up against the winner of that match,” Potter pointed out, glancing at the schedule.

Regulus watched as the Mudblood blocked Flint’s spell effortlessly, her face focused, her movements sharp.

“Either one will do,” he replied casually.

Potter glanced at him from the corner of his eye. “Don’t underestimate Evans – she’s feisty.”

Regulus resisted the urge to scoff. He was confident he’d win against a Mudblood, but he bit his tongue. “She still friends with Severus?”

Potter stiffened immediately.

“I guess,” he replied, his tone noticeably more rigid.

Clearly, the mention of Severus had hit a nerve. Regulus raised an eyebrow, sensing tension. “What’s your deal with him anyway?”

Potter bit his lip, visibly holding something back. “We’re all allowed

to dislike people," he said after a moment.

Regulus nodded slowly. "Yes, but you strike me as the type who could get along with almost anyone."

Potter gave a tight nod. "Exactly. Which is why the fact that I don't like him should tell you everything you need to know."

In the awkward silence that followed, they shifted their attention to another duel platform in the Hall, where Isa was currently – well, *destroying* Silvermire. Regulus had not been wrong about her; Silvermire was a fine Chaser, but she really had nothing on Isa's determination and razor-sharp reflexes with her wand.

Potter seemed to think along the same lines. "She looks competent," he noted.

Regulus snorted. "Competent? She's brilliant." He caught Potter's sidelong glance.

"What is she to you — if she's not your girlfriend?" Potter asked, his tone tinged with curiosity.

Regulus rolled his eyes, reminded of the annoying conversation with Melania and Amaryllis that morning. "She's a friend, Potter," he shot back. "My best friend."

"She looks like more than just your friend. You seem to connect on a different level…"

Regulus rolled his eyes again. "Well, according to the latest gossip, you're right. But no — she's just my best friend. We just… get each other. A bit like you and…" He trailed off, not wanting to mention his brother's name. Potter seemed to sense his reluctance and nodded.

"Maybe it's just that boy-girl thing," Potter added thoughtfully. "And, well, it'd tick all the boxes, right? A Nott and a Black…"

Regulus nodded, taking in the sight of Isa triumphantly snatching Silverwire's wand out of the air.

"I suppose."

*****

As was apparently often the case, Regulus had to admit, Potter was

right. The duel against the Mudblood was harder than he'd bargained for.

At first, Regulus felt confident. The Mudblood might have been competent, but he was a Black and she was a *Mudblood* – surely he would overpower her easily. He started with a sharp flick of his wand, casting a Disarming Charm that shot straight at her. However, she was quicker than he anticipated, countering the spell with a fluid Protego. After that – she didn't hesitate to strike back; a Stunner flew toward him, red light blazing through the air. Regulus managed to block it with a smooth Shield Charm, but he could feel the force behind it.

They circled each other, their wands moving rapidly as spells were cast, countered, and deflected. Regulus sent a barrage of jinxes her way, trying to overwhelm her, but she was nimble, dodging and defending with an ease that was *very* annoying. Every time he thought he had an opening, she would deflect the spell or retaliate with one of her own. Her precision was impressive — far more controlled than he'd expected.

The girl fought with purpose, her movements deliberate and confident. She didn't try to show off or drag the duel out for effect – an annoying thing many people tended to do.. And as much as it annoyed him, he had to admit that Potter was right – the Mudblood was skilled. But he truly couldn't lose a duel to a *Mudblood* – the idea of the news getting back to Mother that he had lost a duel against a *Mudblood* – no, that'd be unbearable. So with a renewed determination, Regulus decided to shift tactics. He feigned a low curse, baiting her into blocking it, then immediately followed up with a non-verbal Stunning Spell aimed at her side. She managed to deflect it, but the effort threw her off balance, and for a split second, her defences dropped - exactly what he needed.

In a flash, he cast an Expelliarmus with all the force he could muster. The Mudblood tried to shield herself, but the spell broke through, her wand spiralling into the air. She gasped as it flew across the room and landed a few feet away.

Yes.

Regulus couldn't suppress the urge to smile contently at the sight of the girl catching her breath. She stared at him – her face flushed from the intensity of the duel – and when she walked over and picked up her wand, she shot him a look that very much made clear she was fuming.

“Not bad, Black,” Potter called from the sidelines, a grin on his face and taking in the sight of the furious girl with glee. “It took a bit longer than five minutes, though.”

*****

Late in the afternoon, there were only three students left – Isa had won against Silvermire and a girl named McKinnon, but had eventually lost to Fortescue who was *fierce* . Isa had disgruntledly joined Regulus at the edge of a duel area now that none of her group mates was up; she and Longbottom were out, that Prefect friend of Potter – Lupin – had lost to Fortescue as well, which only left that sixth-year Ravenclaw, Davies, still in the running.

Potter had just finished his duel against Talkalot, overpowering her – as was timed by Regulus – in precisely six and a half minutes.

“Six and a half,” Regulus nodded when Potter sat down next to him. “Your worst time so far.”

Potter rolled his eyes. “Of course – this is *tiring*, isn’t it? And now it’s only the capable contestants in the running…”

Isa clearly couldn’t make much of the conversation between Regulus and Potter, taking in the scene with a puzzled look.

“So, we’re the last men standing, Black,” Potter smirked.

“And Davies,” Regulus added, taking in the Ravenclaw across the Hall. Nathaniel Davies, the bloke the entire Castle was swooning over. Regulus didn’t really know him, since he wasn’t in his year nor in his House *and* didn’t play Quidditch, but his popularity had even infected the Slytherin Dungeons. Regulus couldn’t totally disagree – the bloke had everything going for him with the brown hair, twinkling olive-green eyes and smooth voice.

“Yes,” Potter nodded, looking at the bloke as well. Then his face broke into a grin. “I’m rooting for you, though.”

Regulus knew it was now his turn, and he secretly wished he had been knocked out of the competition earlier, because with only three contestants left, his duel was the only one taking place. To make matters worse, the other students were clearly bored and had nothing else to focus on, so Regulus felt way too many pairs of eyes on him as he stepped into the duelling area and squared up face-to-face with Davies.

“Black,” he nodded with his annoyingly deep voice.

“Davies.”

Regulus quickly took in the audience – Isa’s nervous glance, Potter’s encouraging smirk and many anticipatory gazes – then turned his head toward Davies and slightly bowed.

Time to shine.

There was something a little off in the way Davies held his wand, his olive-green eyes glancing toward Regulus and then quickly away, as if caught in thought – so Regulus was quick and struck immediately.

"Stupefy!" Regulus cast a jet of red light shooting toward Davies.

Davies dodged nimbly, his robes swirling as he sidestepped the spell. "Protego!" he cast back, blocking Regulus’s follow-up jinx and sending a retaliatory charm his way. Regulus countered swiftly, deflecting the spell and sending a Blasting Curse that sent sparks exploding just inches from Davies' feet.

For a moment, their eyes locked. Again, there was something off, something in his gaze – a determination that almost felt personal. Regulus couldn’t quite put his finger on it though, so he shrugged it off and put his mind back in the game. This was a good thing, because at that moment, with a flick of his wand, Davies sent a wave of blue light barreling toward Regulus — a subtle but powerful Disarming Charm. Regulus felt the force of it crash against his Shield Charm, sending a slight tremor through his wand arm.

“Impressive, Black,” Davies remarked, his voice smooth and genuinely appreciative. He circled Regulus, his wand at the ready, ready to strike.

Regulus merely nodded when Davies suddenly lunged forward, casting a rapid sequence of jinxes and curses, his wand a blur. Regulus was forced to go on the defensive, deflecting the barrage with quick Shield Charms and dodging when necessary. But Merlin, Davies was relentless – and well, Regulus was starting to feel the strain of keeping up with his precise, strategic attacks.

Then, Davies cast a non-verbal spell, and suddenly the floor beneath Regulus's feet seemed to shift, sending him off balance. Regulus stumbled, his wand slipping slightly as he regained his footing.

Luckily, though, he was quick to recover and sent a Stinging Hex in Davies's direction that caught him on the arm. The bloke winced, but didn't acknowledge the hit apart from that – instead, he answered with a stunningly quick Incarcerous, ropes shooting out of his wand and aiming straight for Regulus. Regulus, with a quick flick, severed them mid-air before they could reach him and retaliated with a Blasting Curse, followed by a silent Trip Jinx. But again – Davies was too agile, dodging the first and countering the second with ease.

The duel became a fierce back-and-forth exchange – Regulus realised that if he managed to win this, he'd duel Potter in the final, and well, that'd be *fun*. He could feel his pulse racing, his mind calculating each move, each spell. But unfortunately, David didn't falter – his movements were smooth and his wand work was precise as if he had been expecting everything Regulus threw at him.

And then Davies saw an opening.

With a sharp twist of his wand, he cast an advanced Shield Charm that not only blocked Regulus's latest attack but absorbed the magic and redirected it back toward him. Regulus, caught off guard by the manoeuvre, did manage to block the rebounded spell, but it left him vulnerable for a fraction of a second – and then, well, then it was too late.

"Expelliarmus!" Davies's voice rang out confidently.

Regulus felt the spell hit with force, and before he could react, his wand flew from his grasp, spinning through the air and landing in Davies's outstretched hand.

Fuck, he had lost.

Sure – he never thought he was going to *win* the Gauntlet, but losing to this admired bloke felt particularly painful. Besides, Regulus had an inkling that Davies had mustered *all* of his effort and capabilities to win, and it really annoyed him that it had apparently worked.

Davies quickly tossed Regulus's wand back to him and gave him a nod of respect with an expression Regulus couldn't read.

Regulus irritatedly trudged toward Isa and Potter.

"Can't always be the best, Black," Potter said with a small grin. "So the bloke's decent?"

Regulus shot him an annoyed look. “Relentless – good luck with that. Hardly had the time to think.”

“Duly noted,” Potter replied, just as McGonagall called him to the duelling area. Before he turned to leave, he leaned in, voice low so only Regulus could hear. “Cheer for me, will you?

*****

As Potter and Davies stepped onto the duelling platform, a buzz of anticipation swept through the crowd of fellow champions. Everyone gathered eagerly around the platform for the final match, the energy electric. This was it — the Duel Champion title would go to either the ever-popular Quidditch legend Potter, or the dashing, well-liked Davies.

Potter, naturally completely in his element, grinned from ear to ear and shot Davies a playful wink like only he managed to pull off. "You ready for this, mate? I’ve been told I’m quite the duelling sensation.”

Davies, more reserved, gave a polite nod, though his lips twitched into a small smile. “I’m not underestimating you, Potter,” he said.

“Good,” Potter replied, twirling his wand with a flourish. “Would hate to disappoint you. But you know, I could use the extra Galleons after this duel — I’ve got some bets riding on this one.”

Regulus snorted. “The bloke’s bonkers,” he pointed out at Isa, who looked at the scene nervously. He eyed her in confusion. “It’s just a duel, Ies,” Regulus shot her. “No need to feel so stressed out about it.”

Isa rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know – just wondering who’s going to win–”

“Potter’s going to win,” Regulus said matter-of-factly.

“Well,” Isa said with a raised eyebrow, “I wouldn’t underestimate Davies either; he’s rather gifted at duelling.”

“We’ll see.”

McGonagall gave the signal, and the duel began.

Potter wasted no time, sending a playful Levicorpus charm toward Davies, clearly trying to catch him off-guard. But Davies in turn blocked it easily, his expression serious and his movements controlled.

He flicked his wand and sent a stunning spell in return, but Potter danced out of the way, laughing as he went.

“Come on, Davies! Is that all you’ve got? I expected something more dramatic,” Potter called out, casting a disarming jinx with a mischievous grin. It surely had to be illegal to take so much pleasure in so many things in one’s life.

Davies didn’t respond, though – his brow furrowed slightly in concentration as he expertly blocked the spell, then sent a non-verbal Confundus charm right back at Potter. Potter blinked as it narrowly missed him – his grin faltering for just a second.

“Alright – no more playing around, I see,” Potter shot back, straightening up. Still, the twinkle in his eyes betrayed that he was rather enjoying it. He cast another spell, this one sending a cloud of smoke toward Davies, followed by a trip jinx hidden in the mist.

The crowd leaned in, watching with bated breath. Regulus couldn’t decide between feeling amused by Potter’s antics or annoyed by the fact that he apparently couldn’t take anything in his life seriously.

Davies remained composed, waving his wand to clear the smoke with a gentle breeze charm. He sidestepped the trip jinx smoothly, casting a precise Expelliarmus that nearly caught Potter off-guard. Potter, however, managed to duck just in time and quickly casted a volley of rapid spells – stunners, disarming jinxes, and hexes. For a moment, it looked like Potter might gain the upper hand, but the Ravenclaw managed to deflect them all with a calm, measured grace, never breaking his concentration.

Davies’ lips curved into a small smile as he flicked his wand quickly, sending a full-body bind that forced Potter to dive to the side, landing in an exaggerated sprawl. The audience burst into laughter.

“Oof,” Potter grunted, grinning even as he scrambled back to his feet. “Alright, mate. Let’s see how you handle this!”

With a flourish, Potter conjured a large, glowing shield, clearly showing off for the crowd. He discretely winked at Regulus, who crossed his arms with an eye roll but was clearly enjoying the show. Regulus had been cheering on Potter with quiet enthusiasm, though Isa’s gaze flicked between the two boys as if trying to predict the outcome.

Davies, however, wasn’t distracted. He cast a silent Stunning Spell

with precise aim, slipping it right around Potter's shield. Potter barely had time to react, but with a flick of his wrist, he deflected it at the last second.

The duel continued – fast-paced but light-hearted. Potter tried his best to make a spectacle of every move, clearly enjoying himself, while Davies, although also visibly enjoying himself, remained more composed and focused.

In the final moments of the duel, Potter, still grinning, tried to catch Davies off-guard with a particularly tricky combination of spells, but Davies, with a swift, fluid motion, sent a powerful Stunning Spell that Potter couldn't dodge in time. He froze mid-step, his wand flying out of his hand – and Regulus gasped.

Potter *lost.*

Potter didn't seem to care too much – once Davies had lowered his wand, Potter was freed from the spell and gave a dramatic bow to the audience before grinning up at Davies.

"Well played, mate," he said, accepting his defeat with a wink and walking up to Davies to shake his hand. "Didn't think you had it in you to be this ruthless."

Davies smiled, accepting Potter's handshake. "You were a tough opponent, Potter."

*****

The days after passed swiftly and Regulus had been right about the Professors going easy on them – he even found time to read. He realised, though, that he was quickly running out of books to read and he'd probably have to visit a bookstore over the Easter Holidays if he wanted to be able to challenge his intellect during the remaining months at Hogwarts.

The days were mostly filled with round-up classes, laps around the pitch, and even some pleasant walks outside as the weather began to turn. It was still early April, far from warm, but the sun had made a welcome appearance that week, so with a light cloak on, walking around the Hogwarts grounds was surprisingly pleasant.

So, on Thursday evening, after a satisfying practice at the pitch and a quick stroll by the lake, Regulus made his way back toward the dungeons, the thought of a hot shower sounding particularly

appealing. He was just passing through the Entrance Hall on his way to the staircases when he spotted someone coming his way.

“Black,” a familiar voice called.

“Potter,” Regulus greeted, trying to sound indifferent.

Potter was about to add to the conversation when a small group of students passed by, chatting and laughing. Instinctively, Regulus and Potter stepped aside to let them through, but misjudged the space. One of the students bumped into Potter’s shoulder, sending a bag crashing to the ground with a loud thud. Quills, parchment, and books spilled out across the stone floor, while a few glass vials rolled away in different directions.

“Oh, sorry, mate,” Potter said quickly.

Regulus looked at the bloke and realised it was Nathaniel Davies who’d bumped into Potter. He motioned his friends not to wait for him while he collected his stuff off the ground.

Potter, being the annoyingly well-raised and kind Gryffindor all over, immediately knelt beside him to help him collect his stuff, sending Regulus a stern look implying he expected him to do the same. Regulus, pretty sure that it’d be easier to just Accio the stuff together, rolled his eyes but joined anyway.

“Oh no – you don’t have to –” Davies sputtered while Regulus shoved a book his way.

“No problem,” Potter chipped in.

Regulus picked up a couple of quills and some parchment, his hand brushing a sheet that had slipped out of the pile. And then he saw it…

A drawing.

Just a normal drawing – true, it was beautiful and the artist was obviously gifted, but it wasn’t *that* which stood out.

It was the eyes – the eyes that spoke volumes in all senses to the word.

And then it clicked.

The ride on the Hogwarts Express before Christmas…

"Yes, I heard the only reason why you ended third was because of your 'swift thinking and smooth cooperation' with Davies."

The Ball at Dreadmoor Keep…

"Why can't they ever have us dance the bloody salsa or tango?"

Her absence in general, especially the last couple of months…

The meeting they were instructed on the Gauntlet and Potter's words - *"Can't wait to tell Moony about this competition."* But he was in *her* group – and she had supposedly been meeting with them multiple times that week…

The victory party in January - Potter's contemplative look and odd words… *"Keep an eye on your girl – because someone's taught her to smoke and it clearly wasn't you."*

Even that morning… *"She said she wanted to practise before breakfast. We woke up early to eat together, but she was already gone."* She was probably not even in the dormitory at night…

Regulus's grip tightened on the drawing as he rose to his feet, his gaze locking onto Davies. The Ravenclaw looked nervous, his eyes wide, very much betraying that Regulus was right and that Davies realised he knew.

Without thinking, before he could process the full extent of his realisation, he grabbed Davies by the collar of his robes and shoved him roughly against the wall.

"Tell me," Regulus said slowly, his voice dangerously low, "*please* tell me you're a Pureblood."

Davies swallowed visibly, his eyes wide and alarmed.

"Halfblood."

"Do you have *any* idea about the danger you're putting her in?" he hissed, his face only inches away from that belonging to Davies.

He was in the process of collecting all his self-restraint in order not to punch the living hell out of this bloke. Fucking, fucking perfect Nathaniel Davies with his olive-green eyes, muscular body and fucking artist hands. *Fuck*.

"Oh, I can't fucking believe this!" Regulus roared, letting go of Davies

and turning his back toward him in an attempt to create some kind of barrier between him because he really, truly wanted to break a bone or two in his face. He took in a deep sigh in order to regulate his breathing and collect himself. "*FUCK*!"

"Look – I don't know if you fancy her –"

Regulus let out a very undignified and bitter laugh and turned around, finding him again standing again face-to-face with the sixth-year Ravenclaw.

"*Fancy* her?" Regulus hissed. "You think this is about some stupid non-existent *crush*?" He again grabbed Davies's collar. "They could *kill* her – they could kill *you*, for fuck's sake!"

Davies looked truly started – oh, was at fucking *idiot* – he had no idea what he had gotten himself into. Winning the heart of the eldest Nott –the daughter of Magnus Alaric Nott… probably one of the most dangerous men alive… A halfblood… *No, no.* This could *not* be happening.

Taking in the confused look on Davies face, underscoring that he was so fucking, moronically stupid, he couldn't restrain himself anymore and lunged forward, his fist colliding with Davies's nose with a crack. Davies gasped in pain, clutching his face as blood began to trickle from his nose.

Potter, who had followed the interaction in utter confusion, saw Davies's bloody nose as the signal to snap into action. "What the *hell*, Black–" He grabbed Regulus by the arm, shooting Davies a nervous look.

Regulus, breathing heavily, his mind a storm of anger and confusion, shook off Potter's grip but didn't strike again. He stared at Davies, who was now hunched over, holding his nose with one hand, looking at Regulus with a mixture of pain, shock and guilt.

"I can't fucking believe this," Regulus said, shaking his head in disbelief. He took in the sight of Davies's face once more and walked away.

Unbelievable.

"Black!" Potter's voice echoed behind him, followed by the sound of hurried footsteps. Regulus ignored him, but he *naturally* had to follow him down the stairs to the Dungeons, and as Regulus wasn't

particularly keen on having this conversation play out in front of the entrance to the Slytherin common room, he turned around with an exasperated sigh.

He was so fucking sick of all of it – so fucking *sick* of all of this.

“You *sure* you don’t fancy her?” Potter asked with raised eyebrows.

Oh — he had it coming, really; Potter was practically begging to be punched in the face too.

“Oh, fuck off, Potter.”

Potter, clearly aware of Regulus’s newly found rage, smirked and took a step back. “It’s just, you know — if you want people to think you *don’t,* beating up her boyfriend probably doesn’t help your case.”

“Weren’t you rooting for me against him?” Regulus shot in a sharp voice.

Potter, probably used to some rage seeing he was best mates with Sirius, didn’t seem fazed by Regulus’s anger and let out a bark of laughter.

“Yes — in a *duel* Black, not when you go around punching people — *such* a Muggle move, by the way.”

Regulus sighed. “I know.” He had no explanation for it, but he seemed to instinctively go for his fist first in moments of rage. The painful thought that he took after his father didn’t go past him.

“Now I come to think of it,” Potter continued with that same annoying smirk. “You’re *violent*, Black. In the course of a few months, I’ve seen you carry a nearly dead body twice *and* beat up two blokes.”

Regulus slid down to the ground, leaning against the cold stone wall. He was so consumed by everything swirling in his head that it didn’t even cross his mind that people might actually see him there with Potter.

Potter sat down across from him, leaning against the opposite wall. There was a beat of silence as Regulus stared at the stone floor, trying to collect his thoughts. Potter, probably sensing that Regulus had lost most of his anger, dropped his smirk and turned serious.

“He – and *her*?” Potter ventured.

“Potter,” Regulus said, his voice low in warning and urgency. “You can *not* tell anyone.”

“Look, it’s probably just a stupid crush–”

Regulus cut him off instantly. He was very positive that it was nothing like a ‘stupid crush’, but didn’t voice it out loud. “No matter what it is – you *can’t* tell anyone–” and then the weight of who Potter was hit him like a ton of bricks “–you *can’t* tell Sirius.”

Potter looked positively bewildered by this. His tone was one of accusing disbelief. “You really think he’d rat her out?”

“My brother can’t be trusted with these things,” Regulus said flatly. “He doesn’t understand the consequences of his actions half the time.”

This was true – Regulus could think of tens of situations in which Sirius would use this dirt to his advantage, not overseeing that such a decision, most probably taken in the heat of the moment, could actually cost lives.

“I’m not kidding, Potter,” Regulus continued in a low voice. “ *No one* can know – they … oh *fuck*, what they might do…”

Regulus sighed and closed his eyes. How could she be so *stupid* ? Of all the people in the world – she could have *anyone* – why *him*? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Sure, Black, not a word.”

Regulus opened his eyes and looked at the brown, bespectacled eyes of Potter. His expression was earnest, the usual spark of mischief replaced with something sincere – and Regulus knew he’d stick to his word.

*****

Once he was showered and dressed, Regulus briefly considered staying in the dorm as not to run into Isa, but then he realised that it wasn’t *him* that had done anything wrong, so he decided to join Evan, Barty and Melania in the common room. Taking in the absence of Amaryllis, Regulus figured that she’d be with Isa somewhere avoiding them – well, he hoped so, deep down, because he was in no way looking forward to the confrontation with his best friend. He looked composed and calm, but deep down, he was *furious*. Regulus realised he might actually explode once face to face with Isa, so he wouldn’t mind it if

she was currently hiding out in her dormitory or something similar.

He realised that Isa hadn't been in her dorm, though, for at some point she came bursting into the common room, her eyes trailing over the room – definitely looking for Regulus. He, however, decided to play innocent and casually leaned back on the sofa, his hands behind his head and his legs crossed while listening to a conversation between Evan, Barty and Melania on the new collection of sweets from Honeydukes. He pretended not to see Isa hovering around them, looking dishevelled and oddly uncomfortable. To other people, she might have come across as nothing more than a bit hurried, but for Regulus, it was painfully obvious Isa was exploding with emotions – among which panic and anger were the two most prominent, reading from her fidgeting hands and passive-aggressive eyes.

"Regulus?" she asked, shifting on her feet awkwardly.

"Isa," Regulus responded stiffly, his eyes remaining on the display of sweets scattered across the table, deliberately avoiding her gaze.

"Do you have a moment?" he heard Isa's voice, tight with the effort of keeping her panic in check, her breathing high and shallow.

With a deliberately slow movement, Regulus raised his head and locked eyes with her, his stare cold and detached. For a brief moment, his mind drifted back to the drawing – the way Davies had captured her deep brown eyes with such detail, such understanding… to capture the *essence* of a being, the depth of a soul in a drawing…

"Sure," he said reluctantly – he knew he had to have this conversation sometime, but a part of him relished the idea of letting her stew in her own guilt and anxiety for just a little longer…

However, Regulus also realised that he couldn't really afford fighting with his best friend so close to the Easter holidays and the wedding – oh, *shit*, for which he still had to ask her…

Shaking off his wandering thoughts, he stood and followed Isa out of the common room. She didn't seem to know where to go, her uncertainty evident in her hesitant steps, so Regulus took the lead, climbing the stairs toward the Entrance Hall. Isa trailed behind him, her footsteps quick and nervous.

The silence between them was heavy, charged as neither spoke a word.

Regulus shortly contemplated going outside when he realised it was too late for that and he didn't want to run into trouble because of Isa's stupid mistakes, when he realised that there was a rather good place to talk privately on the third floor – the Charms classroom.

Without another word, he led Isa up the stairs, his mind racing, his anger simmering. Once they reached the classroom, he burst into the room, his movements sharp and purposeful. He refused to sit down, instead standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed tightly against his chest. His gaze was cold and unyielding as he stared Isa down, watching her fidget nervously, her face a mix of anxiety and barely suppressed anger.

"You know," Isa sighed, her voice shaky yet determined.

"That you've given yourself to Davies?" Regulus cut in coldly. "Yes – I know."

A deep blush spread across Isa's cheeks and Regulus felt oddly pleased with her discomfort. She deserved it.

"Have you – you've discussed –" Isa sputtered, clearly trying to figure out whether Regulus had discussed the intimacy between Davies and her.

"No," Regulus shot earnestly. "But the bloody drawing showed as much."

This visibly confused her. "The drawing? It's just a normal one, right? I mean, I am not –"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "You're wearing all your clothes, Nott," he shot, "but the eyes reveal as much."

To capture the depth of one's soul with a quill – he'd have to have access to it.

Regulus felt the anger rise in him again – *Davies*. The epitome of modernism – the Halfblood with his stupid singing, painting and, most probably, stupid Spanish dances. She had to go for *Davies*.

"I can't help it, Reg," Isa said softly, her voice barely a whisper. "I—I lo—"

"Do *not* say it," Regulus cut her off, his voice harsh and final. "Do *not* say you love him. Forget it, Ies."

“I—I don’t know what to do, Reg,” she admitted, her voice trembling now. There was a vulnerability in her tone that Regulus hadn’t heard before.

He looked into her brown eyes and literally witnessed the facade fade – never had he thought you see her so genuinely sad in his life.

It tugged at his heart in a way he hadn’t expected.

Isa’s lower lip quivered as she tried to hold back the tears that threatened to spill over, her once-proud posture sagging under the weight of it all. His fierce, untouchable, determined Isa – so fragile and lost…

Regulus’s chest tightened – he knew what it felt like to suffer in silence, to carry a burden alone with no one to turn to. The helplessness…

Then, without warning, she broke. Tears began streaming violently down her cheeks, shoulders trembling as sobs wracked her body – she stood there in the middle of the empty classroom, arms hanging limp at her sides, her entire frame shaking as she cried her heart out.

She made no move to hide her face or shield herself from view. She just stood there – vulnerable and exposed, her pain pouring out in waves, and it shattered any last shred of anger Regulus had left.

He let out a soft sigh and, without hesitation, took her into his arms. Gently, he guided her to one of the pouffes by the wall, sitting down with her as she continued to sob uncontrollably. Never had he seen her like this – fierce Isa pouring her heart out against his chest.

He slowly rocked her back and forth, pressing his cheek against her golden hair as her tears soaked into his robes. He hated it to see her this way. He whispered softly into the crown of her head, his voice tender and soothing. “It’s alright, Ies,” he whispered, his words barely audible but filled with warmth. “It’ll be okay—we’ll figure it out. I promise, we’ll find a way…”

And there they sat, perhaps for minutes, perhaps for hours – Regulus rocking her, shushing her quietly, brushing his hand through her hair in a comforting rhythm, smelling the familiar smell of his best friend. “Shh… it’ll be okay… c’mon now, Ies…”

What a fucking mess.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, I have been looking forward to this one... Very curious about your thoughts on the story so far, don't be shy in the comments!

Chapter 19: Of Friendship & Bulletins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Strangely enough, Isa's big revelation and the following Easter Holidays marked the start of a period of deepening friendship between Regulus and her, strengthening the companionship that would prove to be life-saving in the years to come.

Apparently, the knowledge that someone had broken Nathaniel Davies's beautiful nose spread like wildfire. Regulus was very glad that no one knew he had dealt the victorious punch — although it would've yielded a lot of approval by especially Evan— because he had no clue what to make, or actually, *fake* of the situation in front of his friends.

"So someone's apparently broken Nathaniel Davies's nose," Melania said, her voice brimming with shock at breakfast.

In a rare moment of unity, all six of them sat together – including Amaryllis, though she kept as much distance from Barty as possible. After breakfast, they would head home for the Easter holidays.

"Oh, really?" Regulus replied. It was probably the first time in his life he'd actively participated in a gossip conversation and definitely the first time he was the first one to speak up. He shot Isa, who was fuming across the table, a pointed look. "Who could *possibly* want to break Nathaniel Davies's beautiful nose?"

It was indescribably satisfying to see Isa squirm in her seat, biting her tongue. Sure, things were more or less alright between them — they'd spent the entire evening in the classroom, and it felt like they hadn't been this close in ages — but she deserved *some* discomfort still.

"Well, indeed," Amaryllis chimed in. "I bet Potter had something to do with it—he lost to him in the duelling final, after all..."

Regulus shook his head, just a little too dramatically. "Well, I've heard he's an awful snog, so maybe there was a girl—" He was cut off by a sharp sting of pain as Isa kicked him under the table.

"–it was Potter," Isa interrupted, her voice stern. "And since when do you know anything about anyone, Regulus?"

He smirked, thoroughly enjoying himself. “Just repeating what I’ve heard,” he shrugged, but the twinkle in his eyes made it clear how much he was relishing the moment.

Eventually, Regulus did partially regret his attitude during breakfast, considering he still needed to ask Isa to accompany him to the wedding. And he *really* needed her there, not just for emotional support through the horrible ordeal, but also to avoid looking like a fool in front of practically the entire wizarding world. So, well, the stakes were rather high.

Unfortunately, he still hadn’t managed to catch her alone, and before he knew it, they were crammed together in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, with the wedding just over a week away.

As Evan and Barty howled with laughter over some prank they’d pulled on Amaryllis and Melania, Regulus's thoughts were mapping out different possibilities to ask Isa, although he was time and again distracted by the annoying voices of Amaryllis and Melania echoing in his head.

“You obviously have a crush on her.”

“*You’re just working up the nerve to ask her out.*”

He shuddered at the memory, forcing himself back to the present, where Isa sat silently reading a novel. She must have felt his gaze because she looked up, her warm brown eyes meeting his with a questioning look. Well — it was now or never.

Regulus jerked his head towards the door, motioning for her to follow him, leaving their friends with curious expressions in the compartment. After passing several compartments, they found an empty one.

“Look,” Regulus began, feeling uncharacteristically uncomfortable. He shifted on his feet under Isa’s curious gaze. “I want to ask you something—it’s about the wedding—”

Isa cut him off. “I know what you’re going to ask,” she said, her voice tinged with hesitation, which surprised him, for apparently she knew what he was going to ask. Besides – it was nothing but a formality, the entire world apparently expected them to go together. And it wasn’t like she had to turn him down to go with *Davies* for the latter obviously wasn’t invited.

But then Melania's irritating voice rang in his head again – *'It's the only explanation...'* Regulus sighed, piecing all the information together. Did she *really*? Before he could say anything defending himself though, Isa opened her mouth.

"Reg – first I want to know…" She trailed off, fidgeting with her robes, looking doubtful.

Regulus raised his eyebrows – she actually *did*…

After all these years in which they had formed a united front against the stupid prying questions about the nature of their relationship and the sentiment that it was positively *impossible* for them to be friends and nothing more – and here was Isa, falling in the trap herself and trying to ask if he perhaps fancied her…

"Do you – do you–"

Despite himself, Regulus found the situation amusing. The awkwardness in her movements, the almost pained expression on her face—it somehow humoured him. Maybe it was the lingering satisfaction of watching her squirm over breakfast, or perhaps Potter's cockiness had rubbed off on him.

"Please, try to finish a sentence, Nott," Regulus said dryly, crossing his arms and biting back a laugh.

"Do you—"

Regulus decided to just roll with it. "—picture you naked?"

Isa's eyes widened in horror. "No, Reg!" she squeaked, her voice high-pitched in indignation. "That's not what I—no—"

Regulus laughed, though a pang of sympathy softened him. "Are you asking if I fancy you, Nott?"

She sighed, nodding reluctantly. "Yeah—just... you know..."

Regulus rolled his eyes, though not unkindly. "No, Ies, I do not fancy you. I'm asking you to the wedding as a friend, with only platonic motives."

She nodded in understanding.

"I mean," Regulus continued, "asking you to the wedding is just — you know — a formality. I *have* to bring someone, and I don't want

other girls getting the wrong idea." He paused, noticing Isa's disgruntled expression.

Merlin, she was such a *girl*.

"Okay, let me rephrase that," he said, light irritation lacing his voice. "You, Isa, are just *beautiful* and I am *dying* to have you accompany me to the wedding and I *love* you with all my heart – but platonically, of course."

They stayed silent for a beat before both burst out laughing.

"That's more like it, Black," Isa said, giving him a playful nudge.

And that was that.

*****

Regulus spent the Easter holidays at Uncle Alphard's for the first time, uncertain whether he should be glad with it or not. His mother had claimed they were overwhelmed with work, family affairs, and wedding preparations, making Black Manor the most convenient place for him – after all, Uncle Alphard had plenty of space and ample free time. Regulus was very much aware of the fact that it had more to do with the aftermath of the Christmas holidays and the fact that his presence would only highlight Sirius's absence, but he let it slide. Maybe it was for the best — he wasn't exactly eager to be cooped up with Mother at Grimmauld Place. Besides, living at his uncle's was practically like having a mansion to himself, with almost nothing restricting his freedom.

It was a bit awkward, though. Uncle Alphard didn't seem to know quite what to do with Regulus on his own, and it was obvious he missed Sirius. Sirius had been a talented rider and always up for a bit of mischief, so their alliance had been a given. With Uncle Alphard's interests mostly confined to his obnoxious winged horses, the liquor cabinet and scandal in general, Regulus could hardly fill that gap.

The first few days at Black Manor were marked by uncomfortable encounters between Regulus and his uncle. It was dreadful trying to make conversation over solitary dinners and only Cissy's visit had given him some space to breathe. It had been a bit of a strange visit, for it was the first time they saw each other since Regulus had stormed out of the Three Broomsticks. They had exchanged a letter or two – but they had been rather formal and not half the length they

usually were. till, once they strolled outside – carefully avoiding the stables and Lord Prance – they had more or less cleared the air. Cissy, busy with wedding preparations, left him with a playful “see you at the aisle” and a reminder that Lucius wanted to meet him a few days before the wedding.

Knowing that Uncle Alphard didn't particularly like spending time with him made Regulus realise that all the forced conversations and encounters were probably mostly an act of pity now that he was there alone, and Regulus was still working on a way to subtly point out that he pretty much preferred anything over the strange smalltalk and stiff dinners that his Uncle well-intentionally put him through.

So when Isa barged in on the third day, as Regulus lay sprawled out on the library carpet after dinner, his first feeling wasn’t shock – it was relief. But then surprise took over.

He blinked, still lying on the floor, taking in the sight of his best friend standing upside down from his perspective. Isa plopped an overnight bag onto the hardwood floor with a loud thud that echoed through the room.

“Evening, Nott,” Regulus greeted, eyeing the bag curiously. The carpet was quite comfortable, so he stayed where he was, even if it meant talking to Isa from a rather odd angle.

“Reg,” Isa said with a determined edge in her voice, “I’m your best friend, right?”

Regulus blinked.

“Right?” Isa pressed, tapping her foot near his head, which was rather irritating given how close it was.

Regulus blinked again. “I suppose.”

“Do you like my company?”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

“And you said you *loved* me, didn’t you?”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

“Good,” Isa continued, “then you won’t mind me spending the holidays here, will you?”

Regulus sat up, studying her face more closely. She looked tired and angry. “What happened?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” she replied, which in Isa’s language basically meant she didn’t want to discuss it. “But I think it’s better if I stay here.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “And your dad’s fine with you staying here — for the entire holidays? Including the nights?” He got up from the floor.

Isa grinned. “Well, it’s a bit unconventional, but my mum’s all for anything that might, in her mind, lead to a wedding between her daughter and the Black heir, so...”

Regulus smirked. “How scandalous.”

“Well, she probably thinks we won’t do anything scandalous — though she did remind me about the *virtue* of virginity and all that.”

“Yeah,” Regulus said, still smirking, folding his arms to give his statement more strength. “A bit late for that, don’t you think, Nott?”

Isa shot him a glare. “Cheap, Black.”

“Davies alright with you spending the night at my place?” Regulus continued. “Eleven nights, to be exact—”

“Oh, toss off, Reg,” she said, slapping his head. “Now — do you think your uncle will be okay with me being here?”

And then the realisation hit — yes, this was *great, fantastic* even – the buffer between him and his Uncle in the form of Isa… and she was a brilliant rider, too… oh, he could practically kiss her feet right now.

“Oh,” Regulus said, biting down his smile as on the inside he was dancing, “he won’t mind.”

He showed Isa to the guest room adjacent to his – the one that Sirius used to stay in, and after she had changed into some comfortable clothes, guided her to the drawing room, where he summoned the House Elf serving at Black Manor.

“Whiskerly!”

With a *crack* the House Elf appeared, bowing deeply. “How may I be of service, Master Black?”

“Could you bring us some tea, Whiskerly? And some biscuits—” Regulus glanced at Isa, now slouched on the sofa in her pyjamas, looking troubled. He whispered, “—and maybe a few éclairs as well.”

“The house elf’s name is Whiskerly?” Isa asked, bemused.

Regulus shrugged, suppressing a laugh at the thought of introducing her to Lord Prance and Mr. Houdini.

Shortly after, the House Elf reappeared with Regulus’s order and was pleased to see the dessert cheering her up.

“Nothing goes past you, does it, Reg?” she smiled warmly. “You know – I am officially prohibited by my Mum to eat any more éclairs ever since two days ago?”

Regulus snorted. “Why?”

Isa rolled her eyes. “She says I’m getting fat – afraid I won’t fit the obnoxious dress I am supposed to wear at Narcissa's wedding.”

Regulus shot her a sympathetic look, aware of Isa’s struggles with her parents' tendency to find something reprehensible in everything. Although in different ways and for different things because he was male, Regulus was very acquainted with the feeling of being not good enough.

“Finish the plate, Nott,” he shot, handing out the platter filled with biscuits and éclairs, “we can enlarge the dress.”

Isa let out a howl of laughter.

*****

As Regulus had expected, Isa and Uncle Alphard hit it off like two peas in a pod. Every evening during dinner, their laughter would echo through the dining room, exchanging the juiciest bits of society gossip. Uncle Alphard always seemed to have an endless supply of scandalous stories — stories of illicit affairs in high wizarding circles, or the extravagant misadventures of pure-blood families — things Regulus frankly couldn’t be bothered to care about. Still, when Isa and Alphard got going, even the driest of scandals transformed into riotous accounts that had them in tears. Last night, Isa had choked on her pumpkin soup when Alphard gleefully recounted the tale of a distinguished family whose house-elf had accidentally blabbed about

their heir's secret gambling debts. Isa, in turn, substantiated his stories by adding the gossip she'd picked up at Hogwarts about the children of the people Uncle Alphard talked about, making for a very animated show.

They rarely made it through the entrée without someone spluttering their drinks or soup through their nose, laughing so hard that even Whiskerley had felt obliged to peek in just to see what all the noise was about.

Besides this, Isa had accompanied Uncle Alphard on several rides through the estate's sprawling forests, and well, with that she had already more or less conquered his heart – his love for her was truly sealed though, once he had overheard her humming at the breakfast table and found out about her musical talent. Now, Regulus was aware that Isa had a nice voice and was musically gifted in some way – but he'd never had the chance to fully appreciate the extent of it. Uncle Alphard, however, had wasted no time steering Isa to the music room and coaching her into a duet and before she knew it, she was swept into a medley of lively waltzes and melancholic ballads with Uncle Alphard at the piano, his fingers dancing effortlessly across the keys. At some point, his uncle had even attempted to rope Regulus into a quatre mains – all the Black were taught to play the piano, after all – but he thankfully had managed to wriggle out of it with an excuse about needing to write Cissy a letter.

So, Regulus had a marvellous time just purposelessly reading, eating and sleeping through the days with Isa dividing her time between him and his uncle. Regulus was pleased with the fact that she clearly felt at home, dancing and laughing and not bothering to wear her stiff, formal robes – although, he did have to remind her of the fact that the house was open to other family members too, who could barge in unannounced to find her singing a duet with Uncle Alphard in her night clothes.

This morning however, Uncle Alphard was off to the Ministry for Merlin knows what, and Regulus, having woken up early due to another round of nightmares leaving him trembling under the sheets, was perched on a velvet settee in the drawing room, reading one of the last pages of his final book. The timing couldn't be better for him to get his hands on a new collection of books.

He heard Isa enter the room, yawning as she stretched out the last remnants of sleep.

“Morning, Reg,” she greeted.

Regulus glanced up from his book, eyeing his best friend who was clad in an impossibly short nightdress.

“Put some clothes on, Nott,” he shot, a smirk curling at the corner of his mouth as he imagined how jealous Davies would be if he knew where his girlfriend was and what she was currently wearing.

“There’s no one home,” Isa replied with a hint of annoyance.

“I’m here,” Regulus pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” she nodded, “but we’ve long established that you’re immune to my charms, haven’t we?”

Regulus snorted. “If by immune, you mean I don’t feel the overwhelming need to jump you while you’re wearing that — yes,” he smirked, thoroughly enjoying her glare, “but this is still a public house, Nott.”

“Yes, yes,” she dismissed his objections with a wave of her hand. “Now, help me find something decent to wear, will you?”

*****

“You *sure* you want to do this?” Isa asked, nervously adjusting her dress and securing her hair into a bun in front of the mirror in the guest room.

“I can go alone,” Regulus replied, watching her from the door. “You don’t have to come. You could visit your sisters or stay here and read. Or go for another ride on Lord Prance once Uncle Alphard returns — he’d be *delighted*.”

Isa laughed. “No, I’m coming with you. I’ve never been on the Knight Bus before.”

“There’s nothing special about it,” Regulus explained with a shrug. “But let’s get going before Uncle Alphard returns early and sets his claws in us — or you, actually.”

Isa nodded, pulling on her travelling cloak as they made their way out of the house and through the gates of Black Manor. Regulus raised his wand, summoning the bus, and when it appeared, Isa discreetly pulled

the hood of her cloak up, staying out of sight. She was rightfully afraid that someone might recognise her and the news would arrive at her father that his daughter was riding the Knight Bus *and* was wearing nothing but a flowery dress – *and* about to venture into Muggle Manchester wearing said dress, that too.

Once they arrived, Regulus led Isa to their destination — Sherratt & Hughes, the bookstore. Isa caught her reflection in the shop's window and paused to stare, which prompted Regulus to push her through the door.

"You look like the perfect Muggle, Ies," he said, rolling his eyes. "Davies would be proud."

"Ha ha," she replied sarcastically, glancing around the shop. "I just feel… exposed. Is this really *all* they wear?"

Regulus snorted, his mind briefly flashing to the girl in the obnoxiously short dress at the coffee shop he and Sirius had visited last year. Strange – it wasn't even that long ago, but it felt like a lifetime had passed since then…

While Isa wandered, Regulus made a beeline for the philosophy and politics section, quickly accumulating a stack of books. He flipped through them eagerly, trailing his fingers along their spines and inhaling deeply, savouring the distinct smell of Muggle paper–

"You are such a lunatic," Isa interrupted him mid-sniff.

"What?" Regulus said in an undignified tone. "Smell this – it's better than parchment, isn't it?"

He practically pushed the book under Isa's nose, who, to Regulus's annoyance, 'didn't smell that much of a difference'.

"So – you actually found something worth reading?" he asked, glancing at the book in her hand.

"Yes," she said proudly, "'*The Passion of New Eve*'."

Regulus groaned. "Lovely."

A while later, several pounds lighter but many books richer, they headed to a familiar coffee shop. Regulus had initially considered returning to Black Manor immediately, but he figured Isa might enjoy the experience of a Muggle café.

“You’ve been here before,” Isa observed when Regulus ordered their coffee and joined her at a table. “You’ve been here with your brother, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Last summer. I needed books, and he… needed a break.”

The waitress brought their coffee, glancing at them with a mix of curiosity and awe. They wore Muggle clothes, but something about them was unmistakably out of place, something which Muggles would immediately notice but be unable to place.

“Do you miss him?” Isa asked quietly, stirring her coffee. A group of blokes several years their senior entered the café, their loud laughter breaking the relative calm.

Regulus shrugged. “I guess – if he could’ve just… departed… slowly - just you know, distanced himself quietly…”

Isa considered this. “He must have envied you.”

This struck Regulus as a rather odd statement – in itself, but also in response to what he had just said. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Isa continued, “he could’ve done that – if he’d been in your position. But as the heir, and you know, Sirius being Sirius…” Regulus understood her point. Sirius was made to be the heir in every way – he was literally the embodiment of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black – except for his ideology. “He could’ve never departed slowly, Reg, and you know it.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Regulus broke it, keen to steer the conversation into a different direction. “What happened with your parents?”

Isa sighed, rolling her eyes. “Nothing new – the usual stuff. Mum’s stressed and taking it out on me.”

Regulus knew he was on dangerous ground. He had to navigate carefully. “And your dad?”

Isa looked away for a moment before speaking. “I think they’re trying for another child.”

It was silent for a while, with only the annoying loud noises of the blokes in the background, when Regulus broke it. “And that makes

you…?"

The silence returned, heavy with unspoken thoughts – he knew it was a touchy subject. Regulus knew Isa's parents' disappointment at not having a male heir was a deep wound.

"Does it matter?" Isa scoffed. "Besides – I'm not sure whether they're going through with it, anyway. Dad's just gotten back from a mission of almost a month and well – you know…"

Regulus nodded. He knew – being away for a month, in Isa's household, always included some dalliance on the side.

Silence fell over the table, and Regulus eyed the group of blokes from the corner of his eyes. The looks they exchanged and the subtle whispers were all too familiar.

"They're all the same, aren't they?" Isa muttered coldly, although Regulus recognised the anger in her slightly flushed cheeks. "No matter what they are – Muggles, Halfbloods, Purebloods – they're all the same. They all undress me with their eyes."

Regulus sighed, finding no truths to counter this because, well, he knew she was right. The situation oddly reminded him of the time he found himself in the Hog's Head – the Lestranges, Dolohov and Corban might feel superior to Muggles, they apparently shared more with them then they realised.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he mustered the courage to ask the question that he'd wanted to ask for days. "Does he – is he kind?" he asked, afraid to meet her eyes.

Isa blinked, puzzled. "Kind?"

"Does he – respect you?" he asked, now taking in Isa's puzzled brown eyes, feeling very self-conscious about touching the subject of intimacy between his best friend and that stupid Davies bloke.

Isa tilted her head slightly, leaving Regulus to sigh. Really, she was so witty and this – *this* he had to spell out for her. "He doesn't take advantage of … you – or anything–" he stammered. He felt his cheeks heat up and begged she wouldn't notice.

Isa sighed and a smile broke across her face. "Reg," she said, her tone indicating she was moved. "You're really special, you know that?" Regulus shot her an irritated glare, but before he could say anything,

she continued. “He respects me, Reg. He’s good – he is a bit like … you … with these things.”

Regulus nodded and was distracted by the loud banter a few tables away, one of the blokes whistling at Isa.

“Let’s go,” she said, rising from her seat promptly.

Regulus nodded and suppressed the urge to hex the revolting bloke – breaking the Statue in a Muggle café accompanied by Isadora Elowyn Nott in a Muggle dress, well, the only person being proud of that would be his brother, and that said enough.

*****

Time moved swiftly, and three days before the wedding – and two days before the rehearsal, the prospect of which he dreaded thoroughly – Regulus, just about to doze off, realised he was to meet with Lucius the next morning. Relieved that his subconscious had somehow reminded him just in time, he set his magical alarm and turned over under the sheets with a sigh. He closed his eyes, defeated, practically welcoming the demons that awaited him once he had drifted off.

The next morning, he woke just in time to take a quick shower. Isa was still asleep in the room next to his, so he tiptoed around and swiftly descended the stairs, making his way to the drawing room. He creaked the door open and realised Lucius wasn’t alone. The group was small, though – it was just Lucius, Rodolphus, and Corban waiting for him around the table, several sheets of parchment scattered about, with a coffee pot magically pouring out steaming cups.

“Good morning, Regulus,” Lucius greeted kindly, motioning for him to sit down.

“Good morning,” he replied, self-conscious as he settled beside Rodolphus. He curiously eyed the rolls of parchment on the table. “What is all this?”

Lucius smiled but didn’t get a chance to reply before the door to the drawing room flew open, marking the entrance of perhaps one of the last people Regulus expected to find in the drawing room of Black Manor.

“Ah, Mr. Black,” came the voice, playful and smirking.

“P-Professor Thorne,” Regulus stammered, visibly puzzled.

“Nice house,” Thorne remarked with a grin, his gaze trailing over the elaborate tapestries in the room.

Regulus shot Lucius a questioning look.

“Ah – Victor’s presence will become clear soon enough,” Lucius said smoothly.

Thorne nodded, casually sitting down on the other side of Regulus and grabbing a cup of coffee. “Mind if I smoke here, gentlemen?”

No one raised any objections, so Thorne lit a magical cigar, the thick, pungent smoke immediately irritating Regulus’s throat. He tried not to cough as the suffocating secondhand smoke invaded his lungs.

“Been following the news, Mr. Black?” Thorne asked, blowing a cloud of smoke as he spoke.

Regulus nodded. “Yes, of course, Sir.”

Thorne nodded back. “Anything noteworthy?”

Regulus thought for a moment – no, there hadn’t been anything particularly significant recently. The last notable update had been the laws concerning St. Mungo’s and Gringotts’ application process. No new attacks, no new measures from Minchum… nothing major.

He shook his head. “No. The changes to St. Mungo’s and Gringotts’ application process are the most recent developments, I think.”

“And what do you think about that?” Thorne pressed, eyeing him with interest.

Regulus, raising an eyebrow for he realised that it practically mattered to no one what he thought of such a development, shifted in his seat. “Worrisome,” he answered, catching the sniggers from Corban and Rodolphus out of the corner of his eye. “Infiltrating Gringotts and St. Mungo’s should be a priority for us – and this law undoubtedly makes it harder to do that.”

Lucius nodded approvingly.

“True. We’ll have to work around it,” Thorne added, taking another

draw from his cigar.

“How?” Regulus asked, curiosity piqued.

“Infiltrating will be harder, but not impossible,” Lucius explained.

“What do you mean?” Rodolphus asked, equally puzzled. Regulus thought about Lucius’s words, and then it clicked.

“I’m sure Mr. Black can figure it out,” Thorne said with a grin, biting the end of his cigar playfully.

“We’ll just… infiltrate,” Regulus argued. Rodolphus rolled his eyes, making Regulus feel like he’d said something incredibly daft. He rushed to substantiate his point. “I mean – we just have to make it through the application process, and once we’re in, we work from there.”

Thorne nodded, blowing out a slow, thoughtful cloud of smoke. “And what obstacles do you foresee?”

This part was obvious. “Certain people will be rejected outright,” Regulus replied, catching the hint of approval in Thorne’s expression. Growing more confident, he continued. “The most prominent pureblood families won’t even make it through the application process: the Blacks, the Notts, the Lestranges…” He thought for a moment. “We’ll have to recruit beyond the obvious families.”

Thorne clapped his hands with glee. “Gotcha.”

Lucius smiled at the exchange, nodding in approval. “Yes, and that’s why we’re here,” he said, locking eyes with Regulus meaningfully. “And that’s where *you* come in.”

In normal circumstances, Regulus would have laughed at the coincidence of someone actually coming in – in the room, that is, following these words. Now, however, he did not.

For a brief moment, he thought perhaps another attendee had arrived or perhaps even that another professor had decided to join the meeting. However, it only took him a split second to recognise the golden locks.

Isa.

Normally, it wouldn’t have been too much of a catastrophe for Isa to

stumble into such a meeting – true, they had all vowed for their discreteness and secrecy and Regulus wasn't technically allowed to share anything with her, but well, she was obviously on their side and such an accidental interruption would be considered nothing more than an inconvenience.

The problem now, was that Isa had clearly just woken up, her golden hair messy and unkempt, and she was wearing that *awfully* short nightdress of hers.

Regulus winced audibly. How often had he warned her that this was a *public* house?

She clearly hadn't even glanced at the room, for she started babbling immediately. "Reg – have you seen my wand case? I swear I last saw it in the bathroom–"

Then she froze in the doorway, her eyes going wide with horror as she took in the scene. Her face turned bright red as she realised who was seated at the table. Thorne, visibly amused by the situation, leaned back in his chair with a smirk, puffing out smoke rings. Rodolphus and Corban, on the other hand, were not so subtle. Their eyes shamelessly travelled over her, practically undressing her further with their gazes — though, considering her attire, there wasn't much left to imagine.

"Miss Nott," Thorne greeted with a wide grin, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "What a *pleasant* surprise."

"P-Professor Thorne," Isa stammered, clearly dumbstruck. "I'm – I'm truly sorry – I didn't know–"

Regulus squeezed his eyes shut, silently begging for this to end. *Please, just go...*

She caught the predatory glances from Corban and Rodolphus, the mortified expression on Regulus's face, and the visibly amused looks of Lucius and Thorne. Her face burned with embarrassment. "I'll… leave you to it, then…"

Without another word, she spun on her heel and practically fled from the room, the door closing with a soft click behind her.

The silence that followed was thick — until Thorne broke it with a playful smirk. "This is Black Manor, isn't it?" he asked, shooting Regulus a suggestive look, his tone dripping with innuendo.

“Interesting to see Miss Nott here so early in the morning.”

Cornan snorted in amusement, while Rodolphus leaned back in his chair, a slow grin spreading across his face. “Very interesting indeed,” he said with mock seriousness. “Guess we know how *he* spent last night, eh?”

Corban whistled smugly. “Seems like we’re interrupting something more important,” he added, making Rodolphus and Thorne laugh out loud.

Regulus wanted to retort something to clarify that it wasn’t what they were thinking – because it really wasn’t – but even if he *had* been able to find the words, Lucius cut him short.

“Now,” Lucius said smoothly, with a small smile, “let’s return to business. After all, I’m sure we all have… *other matters* to attend to once we’re done.”

Corban and Rodolphus sniggered at the suggestive comment, but quickly fell silent as the mood shifted back to seriousness.

“How do I come in?” Regulus asked, eager to shift the conversation to the matter at hand.

Lucius’s expression returned to its usual calculated calm. “We all have our roles to play in recruitment,” he explained. “Each of us, depending on our status, our jobs, our connections, has a sphere of influence. And at Hogwarts... that’s where you come in.”

Regulus nodded, thinking about the last meeting that had ended with Sirius disrupting the affair. The topic then had also been recruitment.

“How do you recruit, Mr. Black?” Thorne chipped in, his voice smooth but challenging, as he took another long draw from his cigar. His eyes glinted as if he were setting a test.

Regulus straightened in his chair. “You inform,” he answered, thinking carefully. “You explain – show what we’re doing, why… for what purpose.”

Thorne gave an approving smile, his grin sharp. “You’re right. *Education* is the foundation. And you, Mr. Black, you’ve got the mind for it — most your age barely understand the *why*, let alone articulate it so clearly.”

Regulus, unsure where the conversation was heading, cast a questioning glance at Lucius.

“We want you to be the source of information for students at Hogwarts,” Lucius said smoothly, watching Regulus closely. “Those from the prominent families are already… *well-informed* by their parents. But there are others — students who haven’t been raised with the proper understanding of our values. If we’re going to strengthen our cause, we must reach them.”

“And the sooner, the better,” Regulus filled in, very much aware why they wanted to inform *students* – for it was the years at Hogwarts that were the formative years when it came to ideology and loyalty. *Clever.*

“Precisely,” Thorne said with a nod, as if Regulus had passed another small test.

Rodolphus, looking puzzled, leaned forward. “But how exactly does he do that? I mean, he can’t just go around blurting our ideas in people’s faces, can he?”

Thorne chuckled darkly. “No, Rodolphus, he can’t. That would be… *messy*.” He turned his attention to Regulus again. “Tell me, Mr. Black, how are your writing skills?”

This took Regulus off guard. “Err… good, I think?”

“My fiancée,” Lucius chimed in, “speaks highly of your writing abilities. She mentioned you have quite the talent for it.”

Regulus considered this. He hadn’t done much formal writing, more reading than anything. But given how much he’d read, writing couldn’t be too difficult to figure out…

“How many languages do you know?” Thorne asked, always keeping the conversation under his control.

“Spoken languages, I presume?” Regulus asked, ignoring the annoying sniggers from Rodolphus and Rodolphus, who definitely hadn’t had to learn ancient Latin and Greek.

Thorne nodded.

“Well, apart from English, French, German… I think I could figure out Spanish and Italian easily enough,” he said. Then he hesitated. “And there’s… someone I know who’s fluent in Arabic.”

“That would be Miss Nott, I assume?” Thorne asked with a knowing smirk, prompting another round of sniggers from Corban and Rodolphus.

“Perhaps,” Regulus responded stiffly.

Thorne grinned.“We’ll start with English, but keep the other languages in mind.” He rose from his seat to stretch his arms, the cigar still between his lips. “Especially French,” he said, casting a brief glance at Lucius. “It may prove useful sooner than you think.”

Regulus frowned, but was too preoccupied by all the information to give the cryptic remark much thought.

“You want me to… write?” he asked, piecing it together.

Lucius nodded, his gaze steady. “We need you to create a bulletin. Small, digestible articles — every two weeks or so. Something that informs students about the true state of things. Our traditions. Our perspective.”

“You want me to help recruit through a *bulletin*?” Regulus said slowly, still absorbing the weight of the task. He had never imagined he’d be involved in recruitment, much less in such a subtle, intellectual way. But well, it made sense – and people *were* awfully misinformed. It was genius, actually.

Lucius smiled faintly. “Precisely. It’s an educational tool, a way to plant the seeds of proper understanding among students.”

Thorne, back in his chair, leaned back, blowing another ring of smoke into the air. “Of course, you’ll need someone on the inside to help with distribution. And it goes without saying — you must remain completely anonymous. If anyone were to discover your involvement… well, the consequences would be severe.”

Regulus nodded, taking that in. “And I guess that’s why you are here?” he asked Thorne.

Thorne’s smirk returned. “Exactly. We’ll be working closely together, Mr. Black. There’s much for you to learn — and much for you to accomplish.”

“Alright,” Regulus agreed, feeling the weight of responsibility settling on his shoulders.

“Good,” Thorne said. “Meet me after the holidays on Wednesday at eight. We’ll work out the details — the name, the content, and everything else.”

*****

Once the men had left, Regulus reluctantly made his way to the morning room and allowed Whiskerley to prepare him a late breakfast. He was halfway through his poached eggs when Isa hesitantly entered and sat down beside him. Without a word, she picked up his fork and took a bite from his plate.

Regulus glanced at her robes, noting how they were a welcome improvement from the revealing nightdress she’d worn earlier.

“Good to see you’re wearing actual clothes this time,” he remarked dryly.

Isa avoided his gaze. “I should’ve listened to you.”

Regulus nodded, his tone matter-of-fact. “You should have.”

She finally looked up, her expression a mix of frustration and embarrassment. “Well, if it’s any consolation, the looks on Yaxley and Lestrange’s faces are going to haunt me for the rest of my life.”

A small smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Well, if it’s any consolation – now the entire world thinks we’re shagging, they’ll never believe who you’re actually dating.”

And they laughed.

Chapter End Notes

> This and the next chapter are actually one of my favourites. I only have two chapters left to write and I'll have the first book finished, so I will update regularly. Let me know what you think!

Chapter 20: Of Weddings & Beaches

Chapter Notes

> Warning: this chapter is a bit darker. But definitely one of my favourites so far ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day of the rehearsal dinner was particularly stressful – it was to be expected, of course, seeing it was the day before the most anticipated wedding the wizarding world had seen in years. Regulus had managed to sidestep most of the pre-wedding chaos due to his refuge at Uncle Alphard's and he was thankful not to have spent the holidays trapped at Grimmauld Place with Mother's unrelenting scrutiny or at Dreadmoor Keep with the bride and her endless to-do lists.

For now, standing in front of an enchanted grand mirror conjured in the drawing room of Black Manor, Regulus caught a glimpse of what life must have been like if he had.

"Okay, so tonight—" Cissy's voice was uncharacteristically jittery as she flitted about the room, adjusting the cups of tea and biscuits on the table, straightening chairs, and generally fidgeting in her attempt to stay busy.

Regulus cut her short, his lips twitching into a faint smirk, "–I will arrive with Mother, Father, and Isa. There'll be a moment for the photographer, then we'll endure the dinner, listen to speeches that will drag on forever, and that's that."

Cissy rolled her eyes at his impatience. "I'm sorry. You know, I've been looking forward to this day for so long, but…"

"It's stressful," Regulus finished for her with a nod.

"Yes," she breathed, her shoulders relaxing just a little. "It's more than just a wedding – you know – everything has to be perfect. There will be so many people, so many expectations, photographers capturing every moment." She paused, then added, with a slight lift of her chin, "But this is what we're born to, isn't it? We have to rise to it."

Regulus said nothing, only nodded in quiet agreement as he looked at his reflection again. His robes were nearly finished — charcoal grey

with deep green accents, subtly adorned with embroidery that hinted at serpentine forms and the Black family crest along the cuffs and collar. They fit him perfectly, and he highly doubted that there was still a job to do for the family tailor, who was to arrive soon.

“You look handsome,” Cissy remarked with a knowing smirk. “I’ve seen Isadora’s dress for the wedding — it will match the colour of your robes perfectly.”

Regulus nodded – every detail had been thought of, of course. Even tonight, Isa’s gown would undoubtedly match his attire. It had been a surprise though, that Isa was expected at the rehearsal dinner; it was a gathering including only the closest relatives, and since he and Isa clearly weren’t anything official – or unofficial for that matter – they hadn’t thought of the possibility that she was expected to be there as well. Thankfully, Isa had accepted the invitation – although, well, when Mother was involved, no one ever declined.

“So,” Cissy began with a sly smile, moving to stand behind him, her eyes meeting his in the mirror, “how are things with Isa?”

This struck him as a rather odd question – she had visited her yesterday to help out with her attire, so surely she knew how she was doing – *oh*, and then the realisation hit him. *Of course* Lucius had ratted him out to Cissy. He was her fiancé after all, and the nearly naked Isa barging into a meeting involving half of the family and a Hogwarts Professor had probably been the talk of the day – or week.

He squeezed his eyes. “Lucius told you.”

“Of course he did,” Cissy said, her lips curving into a playful smile as she reached up to fiddle with his hair. Then her expression turned more serious. “You’re being… careful, aren’t you?”

Another odd question – careful with *what*?

“What?” he asked, confused.

She smoothed the fabric of his robes at his shoulder. “Well – I think you’re a *bit* young for this, to be honest – I also hadn’t taken Isadora as the girl to … but alas, you *are* meant to be together, of course–”

Regulus's eyes widened in horror. No, no, no – this wasn’t happening. He was too dumbstruck by the fact that Cissy thought he was *actually* sharing the bed with Isa to form some kind of coherent sentence before she continued.

“Anyway – you’re a boy, she’s a girl – and at your age–”

Regulus shook his head again. “No, Cissy–”

“But well, you’ll want to be careful – you know how it works, right? Yes, I’m sure you do–”

“Cissy, really–”

He was *not* having the sex talk with his cousin – no, no, *no*.

“But apart from the, you know, technicalities – I know you’re considerate and sweet and all – but still, someone should tell you, you know, to not be selfish–”

“No, Cissy, actually–”

“You have to think, you know, about *her* pleasure as well–”

This was the final straw, really – *pleasure*. He shuddered.

“CISSY!” he roared, Cissy jumping in surprise at the sudden loud voice. “I am *not* shagging Isadora Nott!”

Cissy blinked, visibly taken aback. “You’re not?”

Regulus sighed and rubbed his temples. “I can’t believe I have to repeat this for the umpteenth time – Isa and I are *not* a thing, we have never been, there is no *pleasure*, no bed sharing, *nothing*!”

This visibly surprised her. “There isn’t?”

He fervently shook his head.

Cissy’s surprise lingered for a moment longer before she burst out laughing, covering her mouth. “Oh, well then. That’s... a relief, I suppose.” She stifled her giggles, trying to regain composure. “Take my advice for the future then.”

Before Regulus could respond, the door opened, and Mother swept into the room, her presence immediately silencing the banter between her son and niece. Behind her, Tiberius Fywell, the family tailor, entered, his nervous demeanour as apparent as ever. He was a tall, thin wizard with wiry grey hair, dressed in dark robes and carrying his measuring tapes and wands as if his life depended on it.

“Good morning, Master Regulus, Mistress Narcissa,” Fywell said,

bowing his head. His voice was tight, clearly anxious in the presence of the Black matriarch.

“Mother,” Regulus greeted formally, his posture immediately stiffening.

Mother’s eyes swept over the scene before resting on Regulus. “I trust everything is in order,” she said icily, her gaze turning to Fywell, who flinched slightly.

Fywell nodded quickly. “Yes, Madam Black. Just a few final touches to Master Regulus’s robes, if I may?”

Mother gave a curt nod of approval. “Then finish the work, and be quick about it – you will need to accompany me to Grimmauld Place afterwards.”

Fywell hurried to make the final adjustments, his wand flicking nervously as he tightened the seams and smoothed the embroidery on Regulus’s shoulders. The room was thick with tension, but Regulus stayed still, knowing better than to complain under his mother’s watchful gaze.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Fywell stepped back and bowed again. “Master Regulus is ready, Madam.”

Mother took a long, critical look at Regulus. Her sharp eyes missed nothing — his posture, his robes, his expression. For a moment, Regulus feared she would find fault, but then, to his surprise, her lips curved into a smile.

“Well, look at that,” she said in a low voice, stepping closer and carefully brushing a curl out of his face with a surprisingly gentle hand. Regulus caught the hint of softness and approval in her deep brown eyes. “Don’t you look every inch a Black.”

Regulus gave a small smile in return as his heart skipped a beat in pride.

*****

Several hours later, it became clear that Fywell had done an exquisite job. As they made their way to Littoral Vale, the Malfoys’ beach house, Father wore a black velvet robe, with a charcoal-grey suit underneath that gave him a very dignified look. He complemented Mother’s attire, a refined black silk gown with a structured bodice,

high necklines, and a glittering black opal brooch pinned at her throat. Of course, their appearances, like that of Regulus, paled compared to Isa's. She wore a muted emerald-green gown, fitted through the bodice and flaring slightly at the waist. The gown's satin-like material shimmered faintly as she moved beside Regulus, her elegance highlighted by her shiny golden hair, adorned with a simple silver hairpin.

As per tradition for the rehearsal dinner, they didn't Floo their way into the groom's family estate but instead arrived via apparition — side-along apparition in the case of Isa and Regulus — outside the gate. They strolled down the polished slate path, guided only by the whitewashed stone walls, when Regulus heard a distant rustle. The sounds of camera shutters echoed through the otherwise quiet air, punctuated by hurried footsteps and the low murmur of voices, like a wave of noise swelling closer. He realised then that their location had somehow been leaked to the press.

Mother must have realised it too, as she shot Regulus a pointed look. He sighed and then hooked his arm through Isa's.

He leaned into her ear, whispering, "Davies subscribed to the Prophet?"

Isa arched an eyebrow suspiciously. "Yes, obviously, why?"

"Splendid," Regulus grinned. "Now – give them your brightest smile, Nott."

Before Isa could make sense of his words, they were suddenly surrounded, a sea of flashing lights and frantic voices clamouring for attention. Reporters shouted questions, cameras clicked relentlessly, and the air buzzed with chaotic energy as the estate's Host quickly made his way to them, helping them push through the crowd.

After they finally passed through the gate and the last photographer disappeared from view, Regulus couldn't help the smirk that spread across his face. He glanced at Isa, who shot him an irritated look.

"Tosser," she hissed, though a small smile tugged at her lips.

They were awaited by two House Elves, who took their cloaks and directed them through the marble-floored corridors. Isa gasped as she took in the large arched windows dominating the corridor, offering an expansive view of the ocean, with the sun sinking low on the horizon, painting the water in hues of orange and pink.

“Beautiful,” she whispered, her eyes twinkling in awe.

When they finally arrived at the Solarium Dining Room, they were greeted by Lucius and Narcissa. The couple looked every bit the perfect image for their upcoming wedding. Lucius was dressed in a tailored silvery-grey velvet frock coat, with subtle serpent embroidery along the collar and cuffs. His hair was perfectly groomed and pulled back with a silver clasp engraved with the Malfoy family crest. Cissy wore a midnight-blue gown that highlighted the beautiful shades of blue in her eyes. Her waist was cinched with an elegant belt adorned with sapphire stones, and her blonde hair was styled in loose waves cascading down her back.

“Mrs. Black, Mr. Black,” Lucius greeted with a nod. He shook Father’s hand and kissed Mother’s cheek before they turned to Cissy.

“Regulus,” Lucius then greeted warmly, shaking his hand and patting his arm with his other hand. “Thank you for coming.” Then his gaze shifted to Isa, his eyes twinkling — undoubtedly thinking about their last encounter — as he kissed her cheek too.

“Reg,” Cissy said, kissing his cheek, “Don’t you look handsome tonight.”

“Says you,” Regulus noted, for Cissy indeed looked stunning.

The Host lingered at a distance, waiting patiently for the greetings to finish so they could be shown to their table in the sunlit dining room, which overlooked the sunset-soaked sea. The room was located at the rear of the house, with floor-to-ceiling windows opening up to a terrace with views of the beach. Round dining tables were spread across the room, and — judging by the way the Host directed Mother and Father to a specific table — there was a clear seating arrangement.

Lucius and Cissy naturally sat at the largest table in the centre, where the parents of the groom and bride were also seated — Abraxas Malfoy, Aunt Druella and Uncle Cygnus were deep in conversation. Mother and Father were escorted to a nearby table, already occupied by Uncle Alphard, Corban and Cissy’s best friend Camellia Greengrass – Amaryllis’s cousin. This left two seats at a table – with Rodolphus and Bellatrix.

Of course.

As they walked toward the table, Regulus couldn’t help but notice

Bellatrix's striking appearance. She wore a deep blood-red gown of silk, with high slits running up the sides, revealing boots laced to her knees. She looked beautiful, but in a dark, dangerous way that made Regulus nervous. Like always, she had something predatory, wild and awfully confident. Bellatrix looked up and Regulus noticed how her eyes landed on Isa. A smirk tugged at her lips and a dangerous flint flickered within her eyes.

Regulus swallowed.

Before they reached the table, Regulus managed to quickly grab Isa's arm and whispered urgently into her ear, "Do *not* let her get to you."

Isa shot him a puzzled look while they greeted their fellow table members and sat down.

Now, Regulus knew that something was to happen – Bellatrix was clever and was well aware of the type of husband she had wed, and the stunning, unsurpassable beauté of Isa. He even went as far as suspecting his cousin to have a hand in the current seating arrangement; Cissy would have never placed Regulus at a table with Bellatrix by choice.

So yes, he knew she was up to something – but the cunning eyes trailing over his best friend had misled Regulus in thinking that it'd be directed at *her* – and well, he'd be truly proven wrong about that.

Dinner itself, however, was flawless, of course — each course more decadent than the last. Venison Carpaccio, stuffed dragon prawns, roast pheasant, and grilled halibut passed before them like the work of culinary magic. Still, not even the exquisite food could improve the suspenseful mood at their table. Isa was visibly uncomfortable — her posture rigid, her smile strained whenever she caught Bellatrix's gaze. Rodolphus, too, made Isa uneasy with his lingering glances, while Bellatrix's knowing smirk hinted at something malicious simmering beneath the surface.

As they finished the last bites before dessert, Lucius rose from his seat, the clink of his glass signalling the start of the speeches. "Here we go," Regulus whispered in Isa's ear, "the same speech, just different voices."

"Give me the gist already, will you?" Isa smirked.

"True love, tradition, legacy, values," Regulus whispered back, counting off the points on his fingers.

Isa stifled a snort, drawing Rodolphus's attention briefly, though Bellatrix's gaze remained fixed on her, including a cunning bite on her lip.

The first to speak, as per tradition, was Lucius. He cleared his throat, speaking with his usual measured elegance. "Friends, family, and honoured guests. Tonight, we celebrate not just a marriage, but the continuation of two noble legacies, bound by tradition, power, and the values we hold dear." Regulus caught Isa's eye, and they both suppressed a laugh. Lucius, in turn, smiled softly at Cissy beside him. "I am the luckiest man here, for in Narcissa, I've found not only a wife but a partner. Together, we will uphold the legacies of our families, ensuring a future as strong as the past that built it."

Polite applause and cheers followed. Regulus was pleased to see the sincere and almost shy smile across Cissy's face. After taking in the sight of his favourite cousin though, he looked at his least favourite cousin from the corner of his eyes, alarmed by the fact that her gaze never wavered from Isa.

Next, Lucius's father, Abraxas, stood, his presence commanding the room. His posture was straight and rigid, his silver hair perfectly groomed. "As Lucius has so eloquently expressed, this marriage represents more than a personal bond. It is an alliance between two of the oldest, most distinguished families. The Malfoys and Blacks have long been pillars of tradition and power." He paused, glancing around the room. "This union solidifies that legacy, ensuring the continuation of our proud heritage for generations to come."

Regulus smirked, doing his best not to look at Isa, whose shoulders shook with silent laughter.

Abraxas raised his glass, his expression formal and detached. "To the future of our families — may our legacy endure."

More applause, more toasts. Isa mouthed "legacy" mockingly, her eyes gleaming with humour.

Finally, Narcissa rose, her words soft yet sincere. "Thank you, Lucius. Father. I feel deeply fortunate tonight — not just because I am marrying Lucius – the man who I love with all my heart – but because I am surrounded by family. The strength of our families, built on tradition and loyalty, is what sustains us. And it's that strength I look forward to building upon, with love and loyalty guiding our future."

Regulus smiled faintly as Narcissa spoke, happy to see his cousin truly

content.

As the dessert — glittering Lavender-Honey Panna Cotta — was placed before them, Regulus felt the mood at the table shift, and he knew his cousin was going to strike. She waited until her husband was summoned by Corban and Lucius – undoubtedly to substantiate some kind of anecdote – and then turned her gaze to Isa. Regulus gave Isa's upper thigh a squeeze in warning and comfort beneath the table.

"So, tell me, dear Isa," Bellatrix began, her voice smooth but her eyes darkening like a gathering storm, "what do you think of tonight's dinner?"

Isa swallowed, sensing the tension. It was clear that Bellatrix's question wasn't idle; it was the prelude to something else. "The food is exquisite," Isa nodded, stealing a quick glance at Regulus, who met her gaze with forced reassurance.

Bellatrix smiled — a slow, vicious curl of her lips. "Exquisite indeed. Do you like the dessert?"

Isa shifted, feeling the oddness of the conversation. "Yes… who doesn't like panna cotta?" she said lightly, attempting a small joke to break the tension.

Bellatrix's smile widened, but it wasn't kind – it was a predator's smile. "Quite right. And what do you think of the *location*?"

Isa glanced around, taking in the scenic beach, where floating candles cast warm reflections on the darkening ocean. "It's beautiful," she said, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. "I love the beach, the ocean…"

"Oh?" Bellatrix's tone sharpened, her eyes flicking to Regulus. "Not like my dear cousin, then. Regulus doesn't love the beach, do you, Reggie?"

Regulus stiffened. His pulse quickened, and he felt the air leave the room. Isa, confused, glanced between them.

Regulus remained silent, his throat tight, his palms slick with sweat. She wouldn't. Not here. She *couldn't* …

But Bellatrix's dark, glittering eyes told him otherwise. She absolutely would.

“Regulus doesn’t like the beach?” Isa asked, still confused.

Bellatrix’s eyes danced with malicious glee. “Oh, you didn’t know?” She feigned surprise, her voice syrupy sweet. “Regulus *hates* the beach.”

Regulus often wondered what kind of type he would be in a situation like this – would he rise, draw his wand and force someone to shut up? Or would he cower and beg?

He was disappointed to find out he’d do the latter. Regulus could feel himself shrinking, his skin crawling with the tension. He shot his cousin a pleading look and slightly shook his head – no, no, *don’t* do this, don’t…

“Funny, isn’t it?” Bellatrix went on, leaning in slightly as if sharing a delicious secret. “You’d expect everyone to love the sea. Why, *Cissy* wanted her wedding on the beach…”

Regulus was frozen, staring down at his untouched panna cotta. His stomach churned, a rising nausea threatening to overwhelm him.

“We have a lovely beach house, you know?” Bellatrix’s voice was soft but cutting. “Seacliff Hall — when we were small, Cissy always dreamed of having her wedding there. Such a *picturesque* spot.”

Isa’s gaze burned into him now, her concern turning to alarm. Regulus sat rigid, his hands clenched in his lap, trying desperately to control his breathing.

Bellatrix continued. “I have such *dear* memories of Seacliff Hall,” she drawled, her smirk widening. “The cliffs… the drawing rooms… the *guest rooms* .” She glanced at Regulus, her smile vicious. “You remember your guest room, don’t you, Reggie? And all the people – the House Elf – *Fibble*, wasn’t it? – and of course, our *lovely* governors - there was one I particularly liked… ”

Regulus felt cold, the blood draining from his face. His chest tightened with every word. His hands were clenched so hard his nails dug into his palms, his breath shallow, each second more unbearable.

“I always felt we had a special bond – but well, it was nothing compared to your … companionship now, was it, Reg?”

His vision blurred, his body betraying him, panic coiling in his chest as if her words were choking him, suffocating him inch by inch.

“So many memories – though I hadn’t been back for years…” Bellatrix’s gaze locked with his, her eyes glittering with sadistic pleasure. “But *oh*, did I enjoy my visit last summer.”

She rose from her chair with a satisfied smirk. “You two enjoy the rest of your evening.” Her final words lingered, heavy with menace. “Isadora. Regulus.”

And with that, she swept from the table, leaving an icy silence in her wake.

Panic swept over him – he couldn’t breathe – *but oh, did I enjoy my visit last summer* – he had to get away from here – the bathroom – he felt his stomach turn, tasted the bitter remnants of dinner – she had been there – tainted – she had tainted it – used his worst nightmare for fun, for her sadistic games – he couldn’t *breathe* – she had been there – she had tainted it – *but oh, did I enjoy my visit last summer* …

*****

The night that followed the rehearsal dinner might have been the worst of Regulus’s life – and that was saying something, considering the fact he’d had his fair amount of bad nights in his life.

Although his instincts had practically forced Regulus to flee the grounds of Litteral Vale, his subconscious – probably with the aid of Isa – had kept him at the Malfoy estate; he didn’t dare facing the consequences of taking off early or unseen. So, following Bellatrix’s departure from the table, he stumbled to the bathroom, his steps unsteady, his insides roiling with the nausea of everything he’d just endured. He barely reached the toilet before the contents of the elaborate dinner — the venison, the prawns, the pheasant, and halibut — came rushing back up, splattering violently into the bowl.

Afterward, he forced himself to return to the main hall, hollow and ghost-like, where the endless cycle of pleasantries and small talk continued around him like a relentless storm. He wasn’t really there; it was as if an invisible barrier — some kind of magical veil — had fallen between him and the world. Everything felt distant, muffled, as if he were watching life happen through a fogged window. He moved and spoke on autopilot, his words hollow, his body present but his mind utterly disconnected.

He felt Isa’s worried gaze on him throughout the night, her eyes full of concern and confusion, but he couldn't face her – he gave her a rather sharp order to return to her own home and was glad that Uncle

Alphard was attending an after-party at Corban's.

Because the moment he stepped out of the fireplace and into Black Manor, everything that he had been holding inside came crashing down. He barely made it to the bathroom, collapsing in front of the toilet and vomiting once more – although there wasn't much left in his stomach. Exhausted and trembling, he slid to the cold marble floor, resting his head on the edge of the bathtub.

The icy surface pressed against his skin, but the sensation barely registered. Everything around him seemed vague, blurry, as if he were floating in some kind of alternative dimension. The world was distant, his body foreign. The sharp edges of the bathtub, the coldness of the tiles beneath him – it was all there, but none of it felt *real*. His thoughts spiralled in chaos and they, too, felt fragmented – like a shattered piece of glass.

She had been there – she had taken part in it – *why* had she been there? She had no place, no right to be there – using it for her cruel games – exploiting it for fun. It was tainted – although, everything was already tainted.

His mind flashed back to the man, hanging upside down, blood drained from his body, the horror in his lifeless eyes… The man he had hated with every fibre of his being, whose cruelty had shaped Regulus's life, warping his soul. And the love, twisting itself around all the loathing like a suffocating vine, binding them together in a way Regulus could never fully escape.

The wind stung Regulus's cheeks as he ran along the beach, his feet slipping in the cold, wet sand. His heart pounded so hard in his chest it felt like it might burst, and his face was hot from crying. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, but the tears wouldn't stop. He didn't care about the wind or the cold; he only cared about one thing.

Where was it?

His stuffed dragon, the one he'd had since he was little — really little — was gone. Sirius had hidden it again, like he always did when he wanted to make Regulus cry. His big brother thought it was funny, but it wasn't. Regulus had searched all over the house, through every room, under beds, behind doors. Nothing. His heart hurt so much it felt like he couldn't breathe.

And now, here he was, out on the beach, running and sobbing, while the ocean roared like it was laughing at him too.

“Still looking for your toy, Reggie?” Bellatrix’s voice rang out, cruel and mocking. She stood on a rock, grinning down at him. “What’s wrong? Can’t sleep without your little dragon? Are you a baby?”

Her laugh was high and cruel, and Regulus felt his whole body go stiff with anger and shame. He hated that laugh. He hated that she always called him Reggie, like he was a little kid, and worst of all, she knew about the dragon. She knew how much it mattered.

“Regulus?”

His head snapped up and his heart leapt with relief.

The man came closer, his boots making soft prints in the sand. He smiled reassuringly and knelt beside him. “Why are you crying?”

Regulus sniffled and wiped his face again, feeling silly. “S-Sirius hid my dragon,” he cried, his voice small and shaky.

The man pulled out a handkerchief and wiped Regulus’s tear-streaked cheeks gently. “You’re too smart to let Sirius get to you, Regulus. You’ll find it. I’ll help you.” His voice was gentle, the voice he used only for him.

Regulus looked up at him, his chest still tight but the tears slowing. “Y-You will?”

“I will,” he said, and he smiled. The warm, comforting smile. The smile he used only for him.

For a moment, all the fear and sadness melted away. Regulus nodded, feeling a little lighter as the man stood up, offering him a hand. He took it, letting him pull him to his feet, feeling warm inside.

True to his word, the man found the stuffed dragon, tucked behind a cabinet in the drawing room, and handed it back to him later that night as if it were no big deal. But to Regulus, it was everything.

“See?” he said, ruffling his hair. “You’ll be fine. You’re my boy. My wonderful boy.”

With a jolt, he was ripped from the memory that had felt so real — as if he'd travelled back in time, reliving it through his body, only to return to the present in a haze of confusion and dread. He couldn't bear it anymore – the love — the warmth of it, comforting and consuming — wrapped around him like a soft blanket – the hate – choking him like an inescapable, suffocating cloak – it felt like he was

being torn apart from the inside – the love and hate locked in a constant battle, always clashing, always at a stand-off, threatening to split him in two…

Slowly, he staggered to his feet and threw off his robes, leaving only his underwear. He looked down at his body with disgust, feeling the weight of all the times it had been touched, held — used and loved, caressed and cherished. He couldn't stand it. He couldn't take it anymore. His soul was surely tearing apart – frayed and on the verge of shattering.

He walked to the guest room and opened the nightstand drawer, pulling out the Dreamless Sleep Potion, sitting at the edge of the bed. He gulped it down like a man starved of water in the desert, but as the liquid slid down his throat, he knew it wasn't enough – he needed more. But this was it – there was nothing left…

He could mix it, though – Uncle Alphard's liquor cabinet – it was downstairs… some Firewhiskey, some Mead, it would knock him out – perhaps for days… perhaps forever…

But he had to move swiftly, before the potion would take him out – have to get up now, get there, the cabinet, the drawing room, have to get up, have to get there…

"Did you have fun today, darling? How were the waves? Big?"

Regulus nodded eagerly, his eyes lighting up. "Yeah! They were huge — like really big! My boat went all the way over them, and it didn't even flip! It's the best present ever!"

He smiled, tenderly stroking his hair. "You deserve everything, Regulus. You're such a good boy — brave and clever. Anyone would be proud to know you." His voice was warm, affectionate, and for a moment, Regulus felt safe, like he really mattered.

The man hugged him tightly before he rose from the bed and walked to the door, closing it softly.

Regulus's heart sank. He didn't want to do what was coming next, but how could he disappoint him? Especially today, after the gift, after everything…

"You remember our arrangement, darling?" the man said, standing in front of him, lifting his chin with a hand that was deceptively gentle. "About our little secret?"

Regulus had nodded, though his throat had tightened, gone dry with fear.

"Such a wonderful boy…"

Then came the hands, gently stroking his skin, running over him, mapping every patch, and he wanted to scream – NO, NO – don't touch me – NO – but he couldn't – he never could…

But then, somehow, he did hear it — his own voice, desperate, ragged, screaming in agony — NO! NO! NO! DON'T TOUCH ME!

"Reg?"

NO! NO! DON'T TOUCH ME!

"Reg?"

Suddenly, there was a sharp smack, and the room came back into focus. Regulus blinked, disoriented, his heart racing. The guestroom swam into view — dark, cold, unfamiliar. And then he saw her.

She was on the floor, her eyes wide with shock, her hand against her cheek. She looked up at him from where she had fallen, confusion and hurt mingling on her face.

He had hit her.

"Ies?" His voice cracked, barely above a whisper.

She slowly got up, carefully moving towards him, but stopping at the far end of the bed, giving him space. "Reg? Are you here?" Her voice was soft, cautious.

Regulus stared at her, his eyes vacant, distant, barely comprehending where he was. Isa reached out, tentatively stretching her hand toward him, her intention to offer comfort clear in her eyes. But the moment her fingers brushed his skin, it burned — not *her* hand*, his* — and the sensation was too much. He flinched violently, recoiling as if the touch was something unbearable.

"Don't touch me!" he screamed, his eyes wide with terror, his body shaking.

For a moment, there was only silence between them, his scream still echoing in the room. And then, the realisation hit him, suffocating and relentless. It was Isa — it was really Isa, here with him in the guestroom at Black Manor – it was just Isa – he was dead – he couldn't

touch him anymore – it was just Isa –

Regulus crumbled.

His knees buckled as he collapsed onto the bed and he cried – sobs tearing from his chest, face buried in the pillow, his entire body trembling…

Isa watched him for a moment, her own eyes full of concern, before slowly moving closer. Tentatively, she knelt beside him, wrapping her arms around his shaking body, gently at first – but when she felt him lean into her, she tightened her hold, her arms warm and comforting around him and he couldn't possibly stop – he didn't want to be like this – she could not see him this way – barely clothed, crying – the memories bare and open – but he couldn't stop.

"It's okay, Reg," she whispered softly, holding him as his body shook in her arms. "You're going to be okay."

He shook his head, his voice muffled in the pillow. "I can't do it anymore, Ies," he croaked, his words raw with exhaustion. "I can't."

Isa stroked his hair gently, her fingers soothing. "You can, Reg," she murmured. "You can do it. You will do it."

"I'm so tired," he whispered, his voice cracking. "I don't want to anymore."

"Shhh," she hushed softly, her voice calm and steady. "It's just a bad day, a bad year — but you'll get through it. We'll get you through it – we'll get through it together."

Regulus didn't believe her – not a word – but but he cried and shook and trembled – until there was no more and he drifted off in a deep, painless sleep, Isa's arms closely around him, her voice whispering in his ears, assuring that it was going to be okay, that he was going to be okay, that they would get him through this, that they would get through it together…

*****

When Regulus woke up the next morning, it took a moment for him to realise he was still alive. He groaned and winced, the pounding in his head offering a glimpse of what a hangover must feel like – but the kind from two bottles of Firewhiskey, a punch bowl, and Merlin knows how many dragon-blood cocktails combined with an old-

fashioned wandless Muggle fight.

The curtain was only half-drawn, the sunlight in the room providing a clear view of the messy state it was in. He barely managed to open his eyes to thin slits, though, so he only saw shreds – his robes discarded near the bathroom, books and parchment scattered across the floor, undoubtedly a result of his frantic search for Dreamless Sleep potion, and a dress – Isa's gown. He snapped his head to the left, immediately regretting the sudden movement, and saw Isa still fast asleep beside him, her mouth slightly open, her hair sticking out in all directions. He felt drowsy, and just looking at her made him rest his eyes, drift again, until–

"Black! Time to shine, mate!"

Regulus jolted awake and it took a second or two to place the voice – Corban. The best man. Several pairs of footsteps getting closer to the door – and Regulus suddenly remembered the presence of Isa.

"Oh, *fuck*," Isa muttered in panic – probably woken too by Corban's criminally loud voice.

Her eyes were big in shock, and he *saw* her assessing – could she make it out of the bed in time, hiding in the bedroom? He saw her eyes flickering to the bathroom, but Regulus knew she'd never make it – he shook his head and barely managed to toss the duvet over her, just as–

"Morning, sunshine," Corban greeted, barging into the room with his signature swagger. He smirked as he surveyed the disaster. "Had a fun night, eh? You look like hell."

His eyes flicked toward Isa's gown, lying crumpled on the floor. Too elegant to be treated like that, but alas.

"The bride wanted me to make sure you're up," he continued, already mentally checking off the list Cissy had undoubtedly given him. "Tailor's coming in half an hour, and you're expected at Dreadmoor Keep by eleven."

"Alright," Regulus rasped, barely getting the words out. "Eleven. Got it."

Corban winked and backed out. His voice echoed from the hallway, "Morning, Nott!"

Regulus might have laughed at this were it not for the fact that every

movement hurt. He vaguely recalled hearing more footsteps earlier —

Isa groaned, tossing the duvet aside. Her dishevelled appearance matched the room — hair everywhere, her nightdress rumpled up to her thighs.

“Bloody hell,” she groaned, rubbing her face. “I think I’ve slept for two hours, tops.” Catching Regulus's apologetic look, she smirked and threw in a joke to cheer him up. “You’ve kept me up, Black.”

“Ha ha. Fix your dress, Nott, your boob’s falling out.”

She glanced down in panic, only to realise he was joking. “You tosser,” she muttered, throwing a pillow at him.

And then, a voice from the doorway startled them both.

“Well, well. Such language for such a romantic setting,” Barty’s voice drawled, amused.

Isa shrieked and dove back under the duvet. Regulus winced at the sound. He didn’t know what was more alarming – the sounds Isa managed to produce so early in the morning or the fact that Barty referred to the current state of the room as ‘romantic’.

Evan swaggered in behind Barty, grinning. “*Busted*! ‘We’re just friends,’” he mimicked mockingly. “‘Kept me up all night, Black,’ ‘boobs, blah blah.’”

“Oh, *fuck me*,” came the muffled cursing sound of Isa from under the duvet.

“We’ll leave that to Black, Nott,” Barty quipped with a grin.

Regulus groaned. “Why are you here?”

“Barty’s crashing at mine,” Evan explained. “And, well, we fled.”

Regulus blinked. Fled? And then he realised that Evan’s mum was of course Aunt Druella’s sister – and would be just as frantic as every other woman preparing for this absurd wedding.

“C’mon, Ies,” Regulus grunted, poking her under the duvet. “We’ve gotta get to Dreadmoor in an hour. Better head home so your Mum can stuff you in some gown.”

“We’ll leave you to it,” Evan smirked, giving them a cheeky wave as

he headed for the door. “What’s the house-elf’s name again? I’m starving.”

“Whiskerley,” Regulus nodded, attempting to lift his arms, just to see if moving was possible.

His friends nodded and left the room, undoubtedly going for breakfast in the morning room, leaving Isa feeling secure enough to pull the duvet down again.

Regulus swallowed, lost for words thinking about the previous night – the mornings were always better, and he felt stupid, silly – an idiot even, for his cousin to get him like that – if he could’ve just held his head high, ignored her…

And *fuck*, he’d slapped Isa, didn’t he?

His eyes flicked to her jaw, faintly red on one side – did he hit her there?

“Don’t,” Isa warned, noticing the look in his eyes.

“What?”

“Don’t go apologising – don’t feel sorry for what happened,” she shot him.

“Ies –”

“–I’m serious, Reg –”

“–I’m sorry –”

“What did I just say? You have nothing to apologise for–”

“–I shouldn’t have –”

“*Reg,* stop it!” she said, her eyes pleaded with him as she reached for his wrists. “Stop it. You have nothing to apologise for. C’mon, we have to hurry –” she looked at Regulus’s state. He had dark circles around his eyes, his face pale, hair messy “–just … just get through today, alright? We’ll use every spell, every potion we can get our hands on in an hour – and we’ll get through today. You’ll be brilliant, I’ll be brilliant – then it’s over and we’ll be back at Hogwarts in a few days.”

Regulus nodded.

“You’ll get through it, Reg,” she whispered, her eyes soft and steady. “I mean it – we’ll get you through it together.” Regulus swallowed the lump in his throat, nodding again. Isa groaned, rolling her eyes. “Oh, Merlin, the thought of those cameras - we’re going to bloody *die*.”

When Regulus stood from the bed, the room seemed to spin around him, and his stomach twisted unpleasantly.

“‘We’ll get through it together’,” Regulus mocked, staggering to the bathroom. “Can’t even move without feeling like I’m going to vomit.”

He heard Isa’s laughter echoing as he closed the door behind him.

*****

They did exactly as Isa suggested. With freshening charms in place and Isa managing to get her hands on some Invigoration Draughts and Stirring Spirit Potions from her house, they ended up looking impeccable — Regulus in sleek, finely tailored robes of deep green, and Isa, resplendent in her matching gown, her hair swept up elegantly, both perfectly coordinated for the grand occasion.

Regulus felt hollow inside, a gaping void of numbness masked by a flawless exterior. The weight of his exhaustion and anxiety threatened to swallow him whole, but he pushed it down, hiding it beneath layers of composure – even when he caught sight of Bellatrix from across the aisle, standing beside Camellia, her eyes glinting with the same cruelty from the night before. His stomach twisted violently, but he kept his expression steady. Isa was right: one step at a time, he could get through this. There’d be bad days, there’d be good days – and there’d be days that it didn’t bloody matter because he had expectations to live up to, other people’s dreams to fulfil and a role to play.

And today, his role was that of the Black heir, walking the last Black woman of their generation down the aisle. He was the embodiment of everything his family demanded — graceful, noble, giving his cousin away and forging an unparalleled bond between two of the most influential, pure families in the wizarding world.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of eyes were on him as he escorted Narcissa with quiet dignity, every movement precise and composed. His gaze found Isa in the front rows, nodding at him encouragingly, and he saw Mother, too – her face a mask of elegance, her lips pressed in a small, proud smile. Her eyes gleamed with pride — the warm feeling of confidence spreading through his body as a result.

Cameras flashed, and he knew how to look, how to angle himself, how to stand just so, how to play the flawless embodiment of the Black name. He reached the altar, where Lucius, Corban, Abraxas, Bellatrix, and Camellia stood waiting. He met each of their gazes slowly and evenly, even Bellatrix's, his face betraying nothing but the pride and grace expected of him. With perfect timing, he leaned in to place a kiss on Narcissa's cheek, a gesture that felt like choreography. Then he handed her over to their father, who, with all the ceremony of the moment, passed her to Lucius.

It was perfect. Seamless. Elegant.

And as Regulus stood there, surrounded by the weight of all those stares, the flashing cameras, the understanding that this wedding would be spoken of for years to come, something shifted. Because for the first time he – despite the knot of agony coiling deep within him, despite the storm of conflicting emotions smothering the depth of his soul, his role fulfilled for the sake of something larger than himself – he understood what it meant to sacrifice for the greater good.

Chapter End Notes

> Ahh.. Bella... such a psychopathic B, but God - does she add to the story.

Chapter 21: Of Projections & Quills

A Black Day to Remember: Inside the Wedding of the Year!

Well, well, well! The wizarding world is still buzzing from the event of the season — the grand wedding of Narcissa Black to Lucius Malfoy. While the bride was a vision in silver (naturally), it was her cousin, Regulus Black, who turned more than a few heads as he escorted her down the aisle. And, dare we say, the new heir of the Black family looked positively divine while doing it.

Regulus, dressed in robes that hugged his shoulders just right, appeared every inch the dashing young heir. His dark hair, perfectly coiffed, and his cool, composed demeanour left no one doubting that the Black family has a new shining star to boast of. Several witches were seen fanning themselves as he passed by, and whispers of "Merlin, he's even more handsome up close!" could be heard floating through the crowd. One wonders how long it will be before the matchmaking mothers come knocking at the Black family's door!

But wait — there may already be a frontrunner for young Regulus the Radiant's affections. Enter Isadora Nott, daughter of the fabulously wealthy Magnus Alaric Nott, whose business empire stretches from Europe to Syria. Isa, with her flowing blonde hair and deep brown eyes, arrived in a deep green robe tailored by none other than the finest wizarding couturier in Persia. The two were spotted exchanging more than just a few meaningful glances, and we hear Regulus was particularly attentive during the evening's dance — how romantic! Isa is no stranger to high society, of course, and given her father's powerful connections, well... one might say she's the perfect match for the handsome Mr. Black.

It certainly seems like all eyes were on Regulus — after all, the Black family couldn't have scripted a better moment to present their heir to the world. Charming, elegant, and ever so well-groomed, it's clear Regulus is settling into his new role quite comfortably. Between his impeccable fashion choices and that effortless Black charm, he—

"Oh, shut *up*," Regulus groaned, his voice dripping with annoyance. He lunged forward, snatching the paper out of Evan's hand, who had been gleefully reading aloud in the middle of the compartment. The laughter erupted even louder.

"Come on, Black, they're only telling the truth," Avery teased, his smirk wide as he sprawled lazily across the seat. "Charming, elegant,

well-groomed — you're practically a *saint.*"

Regulus shot him a deadly glare, his jaw clenched. With a flick of his wand, the article burst into flames, curling into ash at his feet.

"Oh, don't worry, *Regulus the Radiant*," Barty grinned, holding up a stack of papers and magazines. "There's plenty more where that came from." He strutted to the centre of the compartment, dramatically taking Evan's place. "Now, where was I?" He flipped open *Witch Weekly* with a theatrical flourish.

"*Regulus Black: A rising star in the social skies, already known for his impeccable taste and flawless appearances. Is it any wonder the ladies are buzzing?* " Barty read aloud in a high-pitched, mocking voice, exaggerating every word.

Regulus slumped back in his seat, massaging his temples. "I'm *begging* you, stop."

"Oh, but wait," Evan chimed in, gleefully flipping through *The Oracle* . "Here's a gem: *'Readers have written in to ask, is Regulus Black the most eligible bachelor in Britain? We think the answer is quite obvious — yes! With those aristocratic good looks and enviable bloodline, it's only a matter of time before he's swept off his feet by some fortunate witch.'*"

"*Toss off*," Regulus muttered, flicking his wand and sending the stack of papers flying out of Barty and Evan's hands, knocking them into Avery, who howled with laughter.

"We just can't help it," Evan grinned, picking up the crumpled magazines. "It's that famous *Black Charm*."

The entire compartment erupted into laughter — everyone except Regulus, who was pleased to see Severus merely suppressing a smile.

"Don't forget the *attentive, romantic dancing*," Avery added, still chuckling.

Once the laughter had subsided, Regulus followed the example of Severus and pulled out his book — *The Art of War*, hoping to lose himself in the first chapter. But just as he was about to start reading, Avery piped up again.

"So... you and Nott?" he asked, his tone dripping with curiosity.

Regulus sighed heavily. Couldn't they just let him read in peace?

“There is no ‘me and Nott’,” he snapped, flipping open his book to the first page.

Barty and Evan exchanged amused glances, then burst into sniggers.

“Yeah, right,” Evan laughed. “We’ve got *proof*!”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, thinking of that unfortunate morning before the wedding. “You don’t have *proof* of anything.”

“We do!” Barty protested. “We’ve got our memories — you, in bed, *naked*, Nott, in bed, *naked*—”

“I was *not* naked, and neither was Isa!” Regulus snapped, the irritation bubbling up inside him.

“You ‘kept her up all night,’” Evan teased, “you were discussing her *boobs*–”

“Oh, *sod off*!” Regulus roared, his ears burning with frustration. “That’s not—it wasn’t—”

The compartment erupted into another round of laughter. Just as Regulus opened his mouth to retaliate, the compartment door slid open with a bang, revealing Dolohov and Lestrange.

“Afternoon, lads,” Dolohov grinned, leaning smugly against the doorframe. His eyes trailed over the boys before settling on Regulus. “Ah, there he is — *Regulus the Radiant*.”

The laughter reached a new height, and Regulus had to resist the powerful urge to jinx Dolohov into oblivion.

“Mulciber, Avery, we’ve got something for you,” Lestrange said, jerking his head toward the corridor. Mulciber and Avery rose dutifully, still chuckling, and followed the seventh-years out of the compartment.

Fuming, Regulus turned back to his book, trying to drown out the lingering snickers with the words on the page. *Sun Tzu said: The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence, it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected.*

He exhaled sharply, his eyes narrowing. Bloody *Regulus the Radiant*.

*****

Regulus had a hard time getting back into the rhythm of Hogwarts; it was strange, unsettling even, that he had gone from being under the gaze of Merlin knows how many people and feeling the weight of practically the entire world on his shoulders to being nothing more than a student at Hogwarts. True, also within the castle walls, bloodline was important and status mattered, but it was nothing compared to the pressure he faced outside. However, back at Hogwarts, he also couldn't spend his days reading endlessly with the laughter of Isa over some scandal shared by Uncle Alphard in the background. On top of that he had been sheltered away from all the gossip and attention at Black Manor – for he could choose to ignore the papers if he wanted to – but here, at Hogwarts, he was constantly confronted with the increase in attention his performance at the wedding had brought about.

The upside of the idiotic rumours that Isa and Regulus were dating was that Regulus was no longer cornered as often by eager girls at the castle. Sure, a few bold ones still thought they could stand a chance against Isa, but Regulus's generally awkward demeanour put them off quickly. Another bonus was that it left Davies nearly fuming — something Regulus never thought he'd enjoy to the extent he eventually did. Never would he have thought to *not* feel uncomfortable in such a situation, but now it appeared that he was finding it rather entertaining.

In fact, on the first night back at Hogwarts, he had deliberately chosen a seat at the Slytherin table that gave him a clear line of sight to the Ravenclaw table.

And, *oh*, it didn't disappoint. The moment his gaze met Davies's green eyes, they weren't filled with the usual kind, playful twinkle but instead brimmed with a surprising amount of disdain for someone who was widely considered a decent bloke. Regulus had raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching as he theatrically struck up a conversation with Isa, fully aware of Davies's intense glare boring into them the entire time.

It had been surprisingly delightful.

However, it didn't make up for the teasing by his fellow Slytherins – *Regulus the Radiant* apparently had a nice ring to it, and people showed no signs of letting that go anytime soon.

So, after dinner, he had occupied a sofa in a rather secluded part of the common room and continued his book. It was an interesting

treatise on warfare and military strategy, though it was a relatively short book, so he expected to finish it soon.

He had just turned to the fifth chapter when a familiar scent reached his nostrils — a subtle mix of lavender and sandalwood, a trademark of Isa trying to sneak past unnoticed. She was wearing one of her special robes, the deep emerald fabric catching the dim light of the common room, her silver jewellery jingling faintly despite her attempt at stealth.

“Evening, Nott,” Regulus said without looking up from his book, his tone as dry as ever.

“Hi, Regulus,” she replied, her voice a little too bright, betraying her nervousness. She shifted awkwardly, her feet shuffling against the stone floor. “What are you reading?”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, taking in her appearance. She looked flustered, clearly busted in her attempt to sneak out unnoticed, her eyes darting between him and the exit like a trapped bird looking for a way to escape.

“The same book I was reading on the train,” he said dryly.

There was a pause. Isa stood there, fidgeting awkwardly, while Regulus watched her with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

“Don’t you have a Ravenclaw to meet, Nott?” he asked with a resigned sigh, finally freeing her from the uncomfortable silence.

Isa sighed in return, a small, reluctant smile tugging at her lips. “I just saw Dolohov and Lestrange entering the common room… just so you know.”

He nodded in understanding and watched Isa exit the common room.

Regulus quickly rose from his seat and was about to flee to the dormitory when he saw Selwyn and Crabbe entering the dorm. He was in no mood for their taunting — and with Barty and Evan sitting with Avery and Mulciber in the common room, Regulus decided to leave the dungeons altogether. He was sure he'd end up hexing someone if he heard another reference to his bloody nickname.

He briefly considered heading to the library, but dismissed the idea, for chances were that Isa was there – although, now that he thought about it, he had no bloody clue where she and Davies usually met up

— surely not the library, unless they wanted to set tongues wagging…. Eventually, he decided against it anyway and made his way to the only comfortable, private spot he could think of – the Charms classroom on the third floor.

Although, when he entered the room, he realised that it wasn't as private as he thought it would be.

He stopped in his tracks at the sight of Potter, knelt in the middle of the room, hovering over some kind of strange contraption. He was intently focused, examining the odd object as if he were inspecting it for flaws, his hands delicately turning parts of it, completely absorbed in whatever he was doing.

"Evening, Black," Potter said without looking up, completely unfazed by Regulus's sudden appearance and intrusion.

"Evening," Regulus replied, a little awkward, standing uncertainly by the door. He contemplated leaving but found himself lingering – he didn't really have a better place to go, and this bizarre project had spiked his interest.

"…what exactly are you doing?" Regulus finally asked, stepping into the classroom and closing the door behind him with a soft click.

Potter paused, then looked up. Regulus was taken aback by the intensity of his gaze and swallowed uncomfortably in an attempt to quench the strange feeling in his gut.

"Ah," Potter smirked, a playful glint in his eyes. "I think I've finally finished my project."

Regulus raised an eyebrow, casting a sceptical look at the peculiar contraption on the floor. It was some kind of clunky device, made of metal and glass, looking out of place in the wizarding world.

"And… that would be?" Regulus asked, tilting his head slightly.

Potter's grin widened, mischief dancing in his eyes. "This, Black," he said, "is a projector."

There was a pause. Potter clearly expected his revelation to land with some grand effect, but when Regulus's expression remained blank, he looked visibly disappointed.

"What?" Regulus asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

Potter rolled his eyes, letting out an exasperated sigh. “It’s a projector,” he repeated impatiently. “Muggles use it to display moving images — well, not like a Pensieve, but similar… it’s complicated. Basically, you show pictures or films on a wall.”

Regulus blinked, his mind scrambling to make sense of this unfamiliar concept. “And how exactly did you get your hands on a Muggle projector?” he asked, his voice dry, laced with mild disbelief.

Potter chuckled, clearly enjoying Regulus’s scepticism. “My dad had it stored in the attic–”

“–of course he did,” Regulus muttered sarcastically. Weird Mugge-lovers.

“—it’s been collecting dust for Merlin knows how long, but I figured I’d try to see if it still worked.”

“I’ve been trying to finish this thing since Christmas,” Potter said, glancing down at the projector with a mixture of pride and frustration. “But, you know… circumstances.” He trailed off, the sentence hanging awkwardly in the air. They interlocked gazes, probably both reminiscing the sight of Sirius bleeding to death near Potter Manor’s fireplace.

“Managed to wrap it up over Easter, though,” Potter continued, his voice picking up as if eager to move past the uncomfortable subject. “Had to get some help from my dad. He’s better at the Muggle side of things than I am.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow, intrigued. “And… what exactly did you finish?”

Potter’s grin returned, the boyish mischief lighting up his face again. “Well,” he said, stepping back and gesturing proudly at the machine, “with a bit of trial and error, and some serious enchanting, I managed to make this thing work like a Muggle television. Sort of.”

Regulus blinked, momentarily taken aback, thinking about all he had read about Muggle television in Sirius’s Muggle Studies books. “You enchanted it? Like… to play moving images?”

“Exactly!” Potter’s excitement was infectious now, his eyes gleaming. “It’s not just a regular projector anymore — I’ve made it work like a television, but magical, of course. No wires, no electricity, none of that Muggle stuff.” He gave a nonchalant wave as if that part was the

easy bit.

Regulus nodded, still thrown by this *weird* turn of events — never had he expected to end up in a deserted classroom with James Potter, of all people, showing him an enchanted Muggle projector.

“Alright,” he nodded cautiously, “and what exactly are you planning to use it for?”

“Ah, *the* big question,” Potter said, his grin turning gleeful, as if he’d been waiting for Regulus to ask. “I can’t take full credit — this was really my dad’s idea — but, well, he’s got a huge collection of omnioculars stored away, you know, from all the Quidditch matches he’s been to…”

And then it clicked. Regulus’s eyes widened in realisation. “*No way* — you’re saying you can display the matches *on this thing*?”

This was definitely the moment of awe Potter had been waiting for – his face lit up even more, practically beaming with pride as he stroked the projector like it was his favourite pet.

“That’s right. I think I’ve almost cracked it. Just a few finishing touches. The omnioculars are still in the dorm—”

“Wait,” Regulus interrupted, his curiosity piqued even further, “how on earth did you smuggle this thing into the castle? And the omnioculars?”

Potter’s eyes twinkled with mischief, a knowing look crossing his face. “Ah, that’s privileged information, Black,” he said with a playful, mysterious flair. “Can’t reveal *all* my secrets.”

Regulus rolled his eyes in annoyance but couldn't hide his amusement. “And why set it up here of all places? Why not in your common room or dormitory?”

Potter shrugged casually. “I didn’t want to share it with the entire House. Figured I’d surprise my mates with it once it was fully functional. So, for now, no one really knows about it…”

Regulus nodded, still trying to process how ingenious — and ridiculous — this whole project was.

“But this... this is brilliant,” he admitted, with a tone of reluctant admiration.

Potter's grin widened even more.

"And for that compliment, Black," he said with mock formality, "I'll let you be the first one to watch a match when it's finished."

Regulus, now too impressed to keep up any pretences of indifference, eagerly stepped closer to the projector. He found himself crouching beside Potter, inspecting the components more closely. His fingertips traced the cool metal and glass, a thrill of curiosity running through him as he realised the complexity of the enchantments.

"Brilliant," he breathed, genuinely awestruck.

Potter gave a satisfied nod, clearly relishing Regulus's reaction. "I think we can try it out tomorrow, after dinner — sevenish sound good?"

Regulus nodded, entirely caught up in the excitement of Potter's invention. The thought of watching a live Quidditch match this way intrigued him far more than anything happening with his housemates. Plus, with Isa probably busy with stupid Davies, and the constant remarks from his house mates, he wasn't exactly eager to spend more time in the dungeons.

"Yeah, that sounds good."

Potter raised an eyebrow, his expression shifting slightly. "What were you doing here, anyway?"

"Oh," Regulus hesitated, feeling a bit awkward. "I was just… looking for some… peace and quiet."

Potter's smirk returned, this time with a teasing edge. "Fed up with the attention, *Regulus the Radiant*?"

Regulus shot him a sharp glare. "Toss off, Potter."

Potter let out a bark of laughter, loud and unrestrained. "Sorry — I had to use it at least once," he said, still laughing.

Regulus rolled his eyes and sank down onto a nearby pouffe, his book resting on his lap. He felt the atmosphere in the room shift.

Potter broke the beat of silence hovering between them. "So… how were the holidays?" he asked carefully, probably deliberately not looking at Regulus as he fiddled with one of the projector's

components.

Regulus tensed slightly, unsure if he wanted to get into personal territory with Potter. “Alright,” he answered stiffly, his tone cautious.

“You spent it at home?” Potter continued, adjusting something on the projector.

“No,” Regulus replied shortly. “I stayed at my uncle’s.”

Potter’s head snapped up with a grin. “The one with the horses?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, a familiar exasperation settling in. “Yes. But I don’t ride. Isa, though—”

“Isa?” Potter interrupted, his eyebrows shooting up. “You spent the holidays with Nott?”

Regulus looked at him, momentarily puzzled. “Yeah… so?”

Potter let out a loud, uproarious laugh. “Oh, Davies must absolutely h*ate* you.”

Regulus couldn’t stop the smirk that crept across his face. “Yeah,” he admitted, with a small, satisfied shrug. “He probably does.”

*****

Classes the next day couldn’t pass swiftly enough – Regulus felt an impatient, restless energy building inside him, a constant tension in his muscles as if he were willing the hours to fly by. His usual focus in class wavered; instead, his mind kept drifting back to the Charms classroom and Potter’s enchanted projector. He was genuinely curious now — more than that, he was excited. He knew Potter had a tendency to overestimate his abilities, but he had managed to amaze him on multiple occasions – so this time, he had a sneaking suspicion that the project would actually be a success.

As the day finally crept toward evening, Regulus was glad that Isa was off with Davies and Barty and Evan not in the mood for studying – he told them he was off to the library but instead made his way to the familiar classroom just as the clock neared seven, a sense of anticipation growing with every step.

When Regulus entered the familiar classroom, Potter was already there, crouched by the projector, fidgeting with it as he made final

adjustments.

“Evening, Black,” Potter said without looking up. “I just have to—” he nodded to himself, twisting something on the projector before turning it to face an empty wall, “—yes, perfect.”

Regulus approached a bit awkwardly, his eyes sweeping over the setup. To his surprise, Potter had thought of everything. On a nearby table were drinks and snacks — pumpkin juice, cauldron cakes, and a few bags of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans. The casual yet thoughtful spread made Regulus suppress a laugh.

“You brought snacks?”

Potter glanced up, grinning like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Of course. We’re about to watch a brilliant match — it’d be a crime not to have snacks and drinks. I mean, what kind of game night doesn’t have food?”

Regulus shook his head, amused but secretly impressed by the level of preparation. “Alright, then. What match are we watching?”

Potter’s eyes sparkled with mischief, clearly relishing the reveal. “The World Cup final.”

Regulus’s eyes widened, a gasp escaping before he could stop it. “No way — Syria against Madagascar? The one you went to?”

Potter nodded, his pride evident. “That’s the one. And trust me, it’s going to look even better this time around.”

Regulus felt a surge of excitement. “Brilliant.”

Potter smirked, dragging two pouffes over to the front of the projector. “Go ahead and lock the door. Can’t have anyone interrupting the first-ever magical projection of a Quidditch World Cup at Hogwarts, can we?”

With a flick of his wand, Regulus locked the door, then joined Potter by the pouffes.

“And now, the lighting,” Potter said with a dramatic flair, flicking his wand too. The room plunged into darkness, save for the soft glow from the projector’s beam. A large, clear image appeared on the wall, and suddenly they were no longer in a deserted classroom but sitting right in front of the pitch – watching as the teams prepared to fly out

onto the field.

They watched the match, both completely engrossed – gasping and shouting at every tense moment as if they were in the stands. The players darted across the pitch, the Snitch flashing in and out of view, and both Regulus and Potter leaned forward, eyes wide, caught up in the energy of the game. They laughed, cheered, and groaned at missed opportunities, each moment pulling them deeper into the excitement of the match, with the snacks and drinks mostly forgotten as they focused on the dazzling display before them.

When Syria's Seeker finally caught the Snitch in a heart-stopping dive, they both erupted into cheers, the exhilaration carrying them through until the projector flickered off, leaving the room in silence once more.

Regulus, still catching his breath, felt a rare, genuine smile stretch across his face. He turned to Potter, who was grinning ear to ear, and realised with a start that he hadn't had this much fun in a long, long time.

*****

Another new development at Hogwarts, aside from the Quidditch screen nights with Potter, was Regulus's secret task with Professor Thorne. As per their agreement, Regulus found himself heading toward the professor's office on Wednesday evening, dutifully telling his friends that he had an ASS-meeting, for he wasn't allowed to disclose anything to anyone.

It helped that Isa had her own secret meetings to keep her busy, and that Barty and Evan didn't seem to miss his presence too much as long as it was filled with Avery, Mulciber and Severus – because this would be the third night in a row that Regulus was spending his time in secret company; although, seeing the different sides his company was on, Regulus realised he had a rather heterogeneous social life.

As he reached Thorne's office, a wave of nervousness swept over him, but he quickly knocked on the door. After an affirmative sound from within, he cracked it open and stepped inside.

Thorne sat behind his desk, rolls of parchment scattered in a casual sort of disarray. He glanced up, a smirk already forming on his lips. "Ah, Mr. Black," he greeted smoothly, his eyes flickering to the clock. "Eight sharp."

Regulus said nothing as he sat across from Thorne – the fact that they were alone doing little to ease his nerves.

“How have your first days back been?” Thorne asked, gathering the scattered rolls of parchment into a neat pile and pushing them aside. His tone was casual, but his gaze was anything but — sharp, calculating, as though weighing every word Regulus might say.

“Good,” Regulus replied, nodding stiffly under the Professor’s unblinking scrutiny. “The usual,” he added, though he knew the past few days — or months, for that matter — had been far from usual.

Thorne leaned back in his chair, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “The usual, hmm?” He tapped a finger thoughtfully against his chin, studying Regulus for a moment longer before continuing. “Good. And I assume you've given some thought to the bulletin?”

Regulus nodded again. “Yes, of course.”

Thorne’s smile widened. “Have you thought of a name yet?”

Regulus *had* thought about a name, but hadn’t thought he would be allowed so much freedom as to name the bulletin. “Well,” he said, shifting in his seat, glancing away for a moment before returning to Thorne’s sharp gaze, “I was thinking about… perhaps – ‘the Pure Quill’ – you know…”

Thorne’s expression brightened. “Ah, *very* fitting,” he purred approvingly. “Clever. Pure information, pure ideology – and a nod to tradition and legacy. I rather like it.”

Regulus fought hard to suppress the pride welling inside him, though the small smile that crept onto his face betrayed his satisfaction.

“But now, onto the real challenge,” Thorne said, leaning forward slightly, his voice lowering as if inviting Regulus into something deeper. “What will you *write* about, Mr. Black? What are the ideas behind the name?” He pulled out one of his filthy magical cigars, which ignited the moment it touched his lips. He took a long draw, the thick smoke curling in the air between them, adding to the room’s heady atmosphere.

Regulus opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated – he had thought of it, but had a rather hard time choosing and, more importantly, prioritising. So many topics had crossed his mind; what pure blood entailed, the laws passed by the new registration, the staggering

number of squibs as a result of mixed marriages, even the economic state of the world following Minchum's reign…

"I've been thinking about it a lot, Professor," he said, choosing his words carefully. "But it's been… difficult to choose one specific focus."

Thorne raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go on."

As if a dam had burst, Regulus suddenly found himself pouring out all the ideas that had been swirling in his mind. "Blood purity and the history of wizards in Britain, the impact of mixed marriages – especially the rising number of Squibs —, the idiocy of Squib rights, the economic policies of Minchum, the erosion of democratic institutions through the Ministry's overreach, the Wizengamot's intrusion into Gringotts and St. Mungo's, the instalment of Minchum…" His words came faster and faster, his enthusiasm building as he spoke.

Thorne, listening intently, held up a hand to stop him mid-sentence. "Easy there," he said, smirking as he blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "You've got a sharp mind, Mr. Black – but," he paused, tapping ash from his cigar into a tray, "you can't tackle everything at once."

Regulus flinched and felt the heat rise in his cheeks, knowing he had let himself get carried away — too eager, too much at once. He looked down, embarrassed.

Thorne, however, didn't seem frustrated. In fact, there was a glint of amusement in his eyes. "It's good to be ambitious," he said, nodding. "But part of being effective is knowing when to simplify. Let's take a different approach." He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the desk. "Who are you writing for, Mr. Black? Who is your audience?"

Regulus thought for a moment. "I suppose… students. People who don't know a lot about these issues yet. Maybe those who aren't as… informed."

Thorne nodded, the smirk returning. "Exactly. You're ahead of most of them. What seems obvious to you—what's been ingrained in you—might not be to others. So, if you want to reach them, you need to meet them where they are." He took another puff from his cigar, his eyes narrowing as he spoke. "Start simple. Focus on a core issue, something that will draw them in. Once you've got their attention, you can build from there."

“Tone it down, basically,” Regulus concluded.

“Exactly,” Thorne said with a nod. “You’re clever, Mr. Black – but if you want to influence people, you have to be clever in a way that doesn’t overwhelm them. Think of it as laying breadcrumbs. Start with something digestible. Let them follow the trail.” He smirked, clearly enjoying the metaphor. “And by the time they’ve reached the end, they’ll have swallowed more than they realised.”

Regulus nodded – it made sense… but then – where to start? What would grab their attention without losing them?

“So – what would you want to write about?”

Regulus sighed. “Well,” he said, cautiously, for he didn’t want to overwhelm his Professor a second time around, “it’s the premiere, so it has to lay the groundwork… something overarching. Maybe… the importance of tradition. Why blood matters. How magic strengthens through generations.”

Thorne smirked approvingly while taking another draw from his cigar. “Go on.”

“I think – writing about tradition, *why* blood matters… you know, explaining how magic runs through blood, growing stronger generation after generation…”

Thorne’s eyes gleamed with approval. “And from there, you can dive into the policies, the current administration—clever,” he said, nodding. “But remember, Mr. Black, always keep your audience in mind. What do they already know? What do they need to learn? Words have power—be careful not to alienate potential readers too soon.”

Regulus nodded, understanding the subtle advice. “Keep it simple,” he repeated.

Thorne smirked. “Exactly. Don’t write a political treatise when you’re just getting them hooked. You’ve got the knowledge, but you need to lead them to it.”

Regulus still felt a bit embarrassed, but Thorne only smirked. “It’s a good thing,” he explained. “It’s a good thing to be informed – to know how the world works. To have such a thorough understanding of the world around you; you shouldn’t be embarrassed by that, Mr. Black. Do you think you’ll have a draft ready by Monday?” Thorne asked, his

tone suggesting the conversation was nearing an end.

“Yes, Professor,” Regulus replied, mentally preparing to leave, but before he could rise, Thorne leaned back, eyeing him thoughtfully.

“How are you so well-informed, Mr. Black?” Thorne asked, a note of genuine curiosity creeping into his voice. “Where does your knowledge come from?”

Regulus swallowed. “I read, sir,” he answered cautiously.

Thorne chuckled, though his eyes remained sharp. “What do you read? I don’t recall Hogwarts’ library having much in the way of political philosophy.”

Regulus hesitated, feeling exposed. He also felt, however, that he couldn’t really dodge the question – and well he wouldn't make an issue of it, right?

“Muggle books,” he admitted after a pause. “I visit Muggle bookstores, read their books on politics and philosophy, and apply them to our world.”

Thorne let out a deep, hearty laugh. “Well, well, the heir of the Noble House of Black in Muggle bookstores.” His laughter echoed through the room, but there was no mockery in it, only amusement. “Genius, Mr. Black. Unconventional, yes, but genius.”

He looked Regulus over, his eyes flickering to the bag beside the chair. “So, what are you reading now?”

Regulus swallowed, hoping his discomfort wasn’t too obvious under the Professor’s sharp gaze. Slowly, he reached for his bag, pulling out the book.

“It’s *The Art of War,* Sir,” he said, handing it over. “By Sun Tzu.”

Thorne raised an eyebrow and took the book, flipping through its pages with the cigar still clamped between his teeth. After a moment, he removed the cigar, glancing up.

“What’s it about?”

Regulus hesitated, unsure of how much Thorne knew about Muggle history. He spoke carefully. “It was written in ancient China, and it deals with military strategy… tactics…” Thorne nodded, encouraging

him to continue. “I haven’t finished it yet, I still have two chapters to read, but – it focuses on knowing your enemy’s strengths and weaknesses and turning those to your advantage. It emphasises strategy over brute force — how to win without prolonged conflict.”

Thorne’s eyes narrowed with interest. “And your thoughts on it?”

Regulus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He had plenty of opinions, but he didn’t want to come off as overeager again.

“I think he’s right,” he began slowly. “Sun Tzu stresses alliances, diplomacy over direct battle. It’s about subduing the enemy’s mind, their will — rather than just wiping them out. And in our world…” He paused, considering his words carefully. “In our world, where bloodlines and magic are so precious, it seems counterproductive to lose magical blood in endless conflicts. Preservation is key.”

Thorne chuckled softly, taking another drag from his cigar. “Go on.”

Regulus’s confidence grew as Thorne’s interest became clearer. “Sun Tzu’s approach is about survival — winning wars without senseless losses. In our situation… well, shedding magical blood to preserve it seems like a contradiction, doesn't it? We should be using tactics that ensure survival, not sacrifice.”

Thorne’s smirk widened, clearly pleased by Regulus’s insight. “A thinker. And you’re right — control the mind, and the rest follows.”

Encouraged, Regulus added:“It reminds me a bit of Machiavelli… the idea of control, of manipulating circumstances. Sun Tzu and Machiavelli both understand power, though in different ways.”

Thorne leaned forward, intrigued. “Machiavelli, you say?” He tapped his cigar, ash falling softly into the tray. “And what have you read from him?”

Regulus didn’t hesitate. “*The Prince* , mainly. Sun Tzu focuses on strategy — how to win without bloodshed, if possible. Machiavelli’s all about power — how to gain it and, more importantly, how to keep it. Where Sun Tzu advises avoiding war, Machiavelli says you need to use any means necessary, including deception and fear, to hold onto control.”

Thorne raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like they’re at odds — peace versus force. But you think they align?”

Regulus nodded. “They seem contradictory, but they actually complement each other. Sun Tzu shows how to win a war with strategy and subtlety, while Machiavelli teaches how to secure your victory afterward — sometimes through fear. The goal isn’t just winning, it’s maintaining control. You avoid unnecessary conflict, but if it comes to it, you do what’s needed to keep power.”

Thorne exhaled, considering. “So, you’re saying the real skill is knowing when to be subtle and when to be ruthless?”

“Exactly,” Regulus replied. “Sun Tzu uses strategy to outthink the enemy, while Machiavelli ensures you hold onto your gains — whether through fear or manipulation. They’re two sides of the same coin.”

Thorne’s smirk deepened. “Clever, Mr. Black. You’re weaving survival and dominance into one. Impressive.”

Regulus smiled, but turned a bit uncomfortable when the silence falling over them stretched a bit too long.

Then, Thorne broke it. “And you’ve applied this thinking to the current state of things? The Ministry… our movement?”

Regulus hesitated, but only for a moment. “Yes. I think there are parallels. Our side — those who believe in preserving the purity of magical bloodlines — must think strategically. It’s not about fighting every battle or showing mercy at every turn. It’s about knowing when to be cunning, and when to be ruthless.. And to win, we may need to be feared…”

Thorne let out a low chuckle, his smirk deepening. “Interesting, Black. A real political strategist, you are.”

*****

In line with his busy evenings the entire week, Regulus made his way out of the Dungeon again on Thursday evening, although this time, it actually *was* for an ASS-meeting. He hadn’t seen much of his friends the entire week and was relieved that no one had realised today was his birthday, for the last thing he wanted was to be thrust into the spotlight, especially with the likes of Dolohov and Lestrange around.

As he walked down the corridor on the third floor, he realised he wasn’t even really dreading the ASS-meetings anymore. He was curious what the next assignment would entail and well - he couldn’t

deny that the Charms classroom had been rather fun this week.

When Regulus entered the classroom, everyone was there except for Potter and Selwyn.

“Good evening, Mr. Black,” Professor McGonagall greeted him as he walked in.

“Good evening, Professor,” he replied, slipping into his usual seat.

A few minutes later, the door swung open, and in walked Potter – his hair damp from what must have been a hurried shower, water droplets still clinging to his unruly hair. He wore a muggle turtleneck — dark, simple, and annoyingly flattering. Regulus's eyes instinctively flicked to the familiar Gryffindor, but he quickly forced it away from him, not fully understanding why his attention had drifted there in the first place. Selwyn stumbled in right behind Potter, nearly tripping over a chair leg, but Regulus hardly registered it. His focus returned almost immediately to Potter, whose damp hair and casual, effortless confidence seemed out of place but somehow... fitting. The wet hair framed his face, accentuating the angles of his jawline.

Potter’s gaze slowly trailed over the room, and came to a stop when it met Regulus’s. His eyes sparkled with that signature mischievous glint, and he bit his lip before winking.

“Evening, Black,” he drawled, slouching nonchalantly into the chair next to him.

Regulus’s throat went dry, so all he could do was nod, and before he could linger on the sudden tightness in his chest, McGonagall cleared her throat, bringing their attention back to the front of the room.

“Now that everyone is here,” she began, “we can proceed with the next assignment. The next assignment, taking place just before the end of term — and after your examinations, of course — will be an enchanted maze.”

Like clockwork, Coolidge gasped with excitement. Regulus met Potter’s eyes and the two of them stifled a laugh, their silent exchange feeling oddly comfortable. McGonagall’s sharp glare shot in their direction, forcing them to straighten up quickly and compose themselves.

“As I was saying,” she continued with a pointed glance, “more information will follow. For now, it suffices to say you will be tested

in different ways — similar to your first assignment. Thus, the advice still stands: identify your weaknesses together and work on them together."

Regulus had a hard time suppressing the urge to roll his eyes in exasperation.

"But that's not all," McGonagall continued, and Regulus couldn't help but feel intrigued by the shift in her tone. "To celebrate the end of the year and the winning team — there will be a Ball."

The urge to roll his eyes had become *very* strong now.

"And," McGonagall went on, "in line with the Association & Socialisation Scheme—" it was almost refreshing to hear the ridiculous name again, Regulus had nearly forgotten what ASS even stood for "—you will be responsible for organising the Ball yourselves. That is—all the champions, together."

The room fell into a tense silence. Regulus shot a glance at Potter, who was visibly struggling to contain his amusement.

"Oh, this is going to be brilliant," Potter whispered, leaning in closer, his breath warm against Regulus's neck. Regulus shuddered involuntarily at the sensation and shot him a confused look.

"You and Davies working together," Potter snickered, his voice thick with amusement.

Regulus scowled, giving Potter a swift punch in the arm.

"Mr. Black, Mr. Potter," McGonagall's voice cut through the playful exchange. "Can I count on your collaboration?"

"Of course, Professor," Regulus answered smoothly, regaining his composure.

"Absolutely, Professor," Potter added with a grin. "I can't wait to see Black's impeccable dance planning skills."

The meeting carried on from there, relatively uneventful – they basically just did their homework while discussing the prospects of the new assignment and the upcoming Ball they had to organise. At some point, Regulus found himself unexpectedly absorbed in a conversation with Potter — about Quidditch teams from the early 1900s versus the current era. It had been so engaging that he hadn't noticed when their

fellow students quietly left the room.

“Wow,” Potter remarked, glancing around the now empty classroom. “Look at that — we’re already done.”

Regulus nodded, thinking about the possibility that one of his friends might remember that today was his birthday – he was sure that Isa knew, and she *could* have spilled it to Barty and Evan – and wanting to put him through some form of celebration. He really dreaded the idea, so Potter’s sudden invitation came as a welcome surprise.

“How about a screening?” he said with a smirk, wiggling his eyebrows challengingly as he held up a pair of omnioculars.

Regulus blinked, caught off guard. Then he found himself smiling. “Let’s do it, Potter.”

They closed the classroom door and set up the projector to replay a particularly ridiculous Quidditch match from a few years ago. As they watched, Potter pointed out a moment where a Beater from the Wimbourne Wasps was knocked off his broom by his own teammate – the sight so absurd, they both nearly collapsed into laughter, tears in their eyes as they struggled to breathe.

After the game, feeling light and cheerful, Regulus made his way back toward the Dungeons. The common room was mostly empty, just the dim glow of the fire casting flickering shadows on the stone walls. Isa was sitting on one of the sofas, watching him with a mixed expression of amusement and contemplation.

“Suspiciously late,” she said by way of greeting, her lips quirking into a knowing smile. “Happy birthday, Reg.”

Regulus sighed, but there was no real annoyance behind it. He walked over and sat beside her, leaning back into the cushions. “Thanks,” he muttered.

Isa handed him a small, neatly wrapped present.

“You got me a present, Nott?”

Isa laughed and hugged him. “Obviously.”

Regulus unwrapped the package and saw that it was a book – a collection from Seneca, the philosopher, in Latin.

“Seneca: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium,” Regulus read out loud. He looked at his best friend and ruffled her hair playfully. “Amazing – thanks, Ies.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, with Isa’s head against his shoulder, after they both rose from the sofa to head to their dormitories. Just as they were to part ways, Isa’s voice sounded soft and pensive.

“I haven’t seen you this cheerful in a really, really long time,” she said.

Regulus met her gaze and hoped that his eyes didn’t betray anything about where – and, most importantly, with whom – he had been spending most of the evenings this week.

He nodded, the quiet settling around them. “Yeah,” he nodded. “I suppose.”

Chapter 22: Of Butterflies & Effects

“Look, mates, a new issue!” Evan shouted, tossing a pile of slim booklets onto the table in the Slytherin common room.

Barty, Avery, Mulciber, Severus, and Regulus instantly reached for a copy. Regulus, being the author, knew every word of it by heart — he could probably recite the whole thing in his sleep — but he naturally couldn’t let on. He’d been slipping away to work on this two evenings this week and had been in Thorne’s office for one evening, and he couldn’t have anyone connect the dots.

Feigning surprise, Regulus flipped open the front page, pretending to be absorbed. From the corner of his eye, he watched his friends’ reactions. Their faces remained stoic, but he could sense the tension as they read. He knew exactly which lines would provoke thought — he’d crafted it that way.

The bold headline glared up at him:

The Fight for Tradition: Why We Must Protect What Makes Us Strong

For centuries, our magical world has been built on a foundation of powerful traditions — passed down through generations, making us stronger with each one. But now, more than ever, we’re seeing a push to tear down what makes us who we are.

Politicians in the Ministry talk about ‘progress’, urging us to mix more with Muggle society, to dilute the legacy we’ve carefully built. They tell us bloodlines don’t matter, that tradition is outdated. But ask yourself: where does real magic come from? It’s our history – our heritage, that gives us power.

This isn’t just about the past — it’s about the future. Magic is stronger when we honour the traditions that made it great. When we throw that away, we weaken everything. Don’t be fooled by the noise of ‘modernisation’ — we know that lasting power comes from knowing where we come from.

It’s time to stand up and protect what makes us strong. These changes threaten the very core of who we are. We cannot sit quietly while the values that bind us together are eroded. Now more than ever, we need to take a stand. Now more than ever, we need to unite against these

worrisome developments. Now more than ever, we must ensure our magical heritage endures.

The future of magic depends on it.

Severus broke the silence first. “I like the mobilising tone,” he nodded, tapping the leaflet with his finger.

Regulus suppressed a smirk, keeping his expression calm. That was exactly what he’d aimed for. So far, he’d mostly written explanatory pieces, but this — this was a call to action. A shift in strategy. He nodded, flipping the booklet to the back page, pretending to read the article he already knew word for word.

Mulciber let out a low chuckle. “About time someone called it out. The world’s getting soft.”

Avery nodded in agreement. “This’ll stir things up for sure.”

Regulus kept quiet and flipped the leaflet over casually, his fingers brushing the edge of the next headline.

The Tragedy of Squibs: When Magic is Just Out of Reach

In the magical world, few things are more tragic than the life of a Squib — born into a magical family but lacking the ability to perform magic. While we often hear about the importance of inclusivity and integration with Muggles, what is less discussed is the increasing number of Squibs born from mixed marriages.

It’s a sad reality: the more our bloodlines mix with non-magical ones, the more frequently Squibs appear. These individuals, painfully aware of the world they belong to by birth but unable to partake in it, live in a sort of limbo. They see the magic around them, but they are unable to join it — a cruel reminder of what they’re missing.

Squibs face a difficult existence. Neither truly a part of the Muggle world nor fully able to integrate into the magical one, they often feel isolated, stuck between two realms. What could be more tragic than knowing the wonders of magic but being unable to access them?

As we move forward as a magical society, we must ask ourselves: are we truly serving the best interests of our world, or the best interests of those born without magic, by encouraging the breakdown of magical bloodlines? Squibs are a reminder that not everyone is able to bridge the gap between our worlds — and their lives are a testament to the painful cost of ignoring

this truth.

As the others continued to read, Regulus quietly savoured the impact his words were having – to say that the leaflets were a success would be an understatement.

He'd made it a habit to produce new content weekly, though shaping each piece into something digestible for all students — many of whom were less knowledgeable or deeply rooted in magical tradition — was no easy task. More than once, Thorne had pushed back on his drafts, deeming them 'too refined' or not direct enough to capture the attention of the wider audience. Regulus was slowly getting the hang of it, though – with each new issue, the writing took less effort and the ideas flowed more naturally. What had once consumed most of his time now required just a single evening each week. Still, either way, it was worth every minute.

Every Sunday before dinner, the leaflets were discreetly distributed around the castle – in common rooms, in the changing rooms around the Quidditch pitch, tucked into deserted classrooms, and even scattered across the empty corridors. The subjects covered in *the Pure Quill* were all everyone seemed to talk about, which was exactly what Regulus intended – people were thinking, people were questioning, people were beginning to read the newspaper with more scrutiny. It felt like he was at the heart of an educational and ideological revolution and it felt *good*.

Sure, not everyone appreciated the ideas spread by the *Pure Quill*. Every week, the Gryffindors would make a grand show of burning the leaflets they found in the castle, especially during dinner, always with eyes locked on the Slytherin table. Sirius was the ringleader of this display, standing atop the Gryffindor table with dramatic flair, setting fire to the pamphlets with his wand, while his friends — including Potter — levitated them in mid-air for all to see.

It didn't go past Regulus that if one of his own housemates dared stand on a table, they'd have lost points in a heartbeat or faced detention. The fact that Sirius was apparently granted a carte blanche was very telling of the official course Hogwarts was taking, including its staff.

Not that it bothered Regulus, though – quite the opposite.

It was precisely this spectacle by the pride-wounded Gryffindors that

made *the Pure Quill* such a raging success – it ensured that every single student in the castle knew about the bulletins. There wasn't a soul in the Castle that didn't read the Bulletin over which there was so much commotion.

Sirius had no idea how much he was actually helping his brother's cause.

"Have you seen the new edition?" Melania asked with a mix of approval and gossip in her tone, waving the bulletin before settling down, Amaryllis and Isa following behind.

"Reading it now," Evan replied, still scanning the final article. He glanced up with a smirk. "You know what'd be really fun? If you'd met this bloke, Black."

Barty nodded eagerly. "Yeah, you two would be unstoppable — your ideas, his writing…"

"Who says it's a bloke?" Amaryllis interrupted, irritated.

"It's *obviously* a bloke, Greengrass," Barty shot back.

"No," Melania cut in, "I'm with Amar on this one. It's definitely a girl."

Regulus had a hard time biting his tongue – surely it was obvious that a *guy* had written this, right? Was his writing … *girly*? He shook off the thought as he felt Isa's piercing eyes on him and pointedly avoided her gaze, afraid that his eyes would give it away.

He was sure that Isa suspected him to be the author – the girl was annoyingly sharp *and* knew him almost better than himself, so for her the leaflets probably had his name written all over them. She knew how these things worked, though, so she never asked; she knew that if he *were* indeed behind it, he'd have sworn secrecy and it would be unfair to put him on the spot. And, somewhere deep down, Regulus was glad – with her thinking he was sneaking off to write for the bulletin, he didn't have to explain where he really was — or who he was actually with. Isa, of course, had her own secretive meetings, and with Barty and Evan suspecting Isa and Regulus were getting it on regularly in some kind of broom cupboard, they had all covered each other's tracks.

Such an impressive web they'd spun together.

Regulus didn't really know what to make of his evenings in the company of Potter, other than that it was fun to an extent he'd never imagined. Their activities weren't confined to the screening of Quidditch matches, though – they'd read, do homework, discuss Quidditch Feints, and share the latest vile gossip that Potter had overheard – probably from Sirius. And well – mostly, they just *laughed*. Potter had a sharp sense of humour, and within minutes of being together, they'd be roaring with laughter. Regulus felt lighter, happier — happier than he'd been in a long time. Even the nightmares that plagued him seemed to fade after their rendezvous.

It had been ages since Regulus had made new friends. His current ones were forged in first year, if not earlier, and meeting someone new felt refreshing. Potter, with his easygoing nature and knack for finding the fun in everything, was exactly what Regulus needed.

They were careful, though, never to venture into dangerous topics like the war, their opposing ideologies, or Sirius – for Sirius would most likely interpret their new companionship as the highest form of treason from both Potter and Regulus. Sirius apparently didn't expect a thing, though – he had a girlfriend now and spent most of his nights with her. With the Prefect swarmed with the duties that came with his position and the Pettigrew bloke having a hard time keeping up with OWL coursework, Potter was off the hook and had free reign in his schedule.

Tonight, however, he wasn't sneaking off to meet Potter in secret in the Charms classroom – no, tonight he was set to spend the evening with all the 'unity champions' for the first meeting about organising the Ball. This, naturally, also meant that Isa would be there – and Davies too. Regulus didn't quite know whether he was looking forward to it or not; it'd be a nice setting to rile up Davies, but he also knew that Isa would see through his antics with Potter quickly. It'd be rather hard to polish away the level to which they had grown familiar with each other, after all.

So, with a mix of anxiety and anticipation, Regulus walked toward the Great Hall with Isa, stealing glances at her out of the corner of his eye. She was fidgeting, clearly uncomfortable. She was *nervous*. Regulus grinned.

"What?" Isa asked sharply, catching his smirk.

"Nothing," Regulus replied innocently. "Just looking forward to tonight."

Isa narrowed her eyes. "*Why*?"

He shrugged, throwing an arm around her shoulder. "It's just a *beautiful* evening, Nott."

Isa glared. "Don't go pestering Nathaniel."

"Pestering?" Regulus said, feigning shock. "I wouldn't *dream* of it."

"I'm serious, Reg," Isa said, her irritation giving way to a hint of pleading. "It'll raise suspicions—"

Regulus let out a bark of laughter as they entered the Great Hall, already filled with students. "Ah, so it's the *suspicions* that bother you, not your boyfriend's ego–"

"Don't you think he's already having enough of a hard time?" Isa shot him irritatedly.

Regulus nodded, unable to fully hide his satisfaction. "Well, if he thinks *this* is difficult…" His gaze settled on Davies across the hall, whose glare was locked on the arm draped over Isa's shoulder. "He clearly hasn't met your father yet."

Isa scowled. "You tosser," Isa scowled, pushing him away, though a small smile tugged at her lips.

Regulus laughed and held his hands up in mock surrender. "Just speaking the truth, Nott!"

His laughter faded as Isa made her way to her group, which included Davies. Despite everyone being in the same hall, the students still clustered with their respective groups rather than mingling – Dumbledore would be bloody proud.

With an irritated glance at Isa and her coy smile aimed at Davies, Regulus turned and headed to his own group — or more specifically, to Potter. Potter who, again, managed to pull off a Muggle sweater like no one else somehow could. As if sensing Regulus's gaze, Potter turned around, his brown eyes twinkling mischievously as he bit his lower lip. Regulus felt a jolt of something he couldn't quite name as he approached.

"Evening, Black," Potter said with a smirk.

"Potter," Regulus nodded stiffly, unsure how to act in front of so many

people. It was much easier when they were alone — everything just felt more natural then.

“What’s the matter?” Potter whispered, amusement gleaming in his eyes. “Worried they’ll find out about our friendship, Black?”

Regulus snorted. “We’re friends now?”

Potter burst into laughter. “Yes, I’d say we are.”

Regulus shrugged, playing it cool. “Whatever floats your boat, Potter.”

“Does this mean I can call you Regulus now?”

“No, Potter,” Regulus said firmly. “You most certainly cannot.”

Potter grinned. “I’ll win you over one of these days, Black,” he teased, leaning in with a mischievous glint. “And soon enough, you’ll have me saying ‘Regulus’ every time.”

Before Regulus could think about a witty retort – if he had been able to, for his gut felt funny all of a sudden – his attention was pulled to the Staff Table, where the Headmaster stood, arms wide, welcoming them all with his usual flair.

Dumbledore’s booming voice echoed through the hall as he announced the evening’s agenda. It wasn’t the most riveting of speeches, and Regulus half-listened while mostly being immersed by the sight of Potter’s sweater.

“Tonight, you will be divided into five groups,” Dumbledore declared. “Each group will have a responsibility for the Ball. One group will handle the location, another the decorations, another the food and drinks, another the invitations…” Dumbledore paused, giving Regulus the feeling he was inventing on the fly. “And lastly, the... er, entertainment.”

“Entertainment?” Potter whispered, leaning closer to Regulus. Regulus shuddered at the warmth Potter radiated onto his skin.

“I’ll sign you up for that one. You can juggle or something.”

Regulus smothered a laugh. “Sure. As long as you volunteer to be my juggling practice.”

Before Potter could respond, Professor McGonagall took the floor and started announcing the group division. Names blurred past Regulus

until: "Now, let's see," McGonagall said briskly, scanning the parchment in her hand. "Group four, tasked with the food and drinks: Miss Nott, Mister Davies, Mister Potter..." she hesitated for a second, and then her eyes flicked up. "Mister Black."

There was a moment of palpable silence as Regulus looked at his new group mates, registering what had just happened.

Isa looked like she'd been hit with a Bludger — eyes wide, mouth slightly agape, as if the universe had just played the cruellest joke imaginable. Potter, on the other hand, was practically vibrating with laughter, barely managing to keep it together.

And Davies – Davies was fuming, his face a mix of indignation and attempted coldness. Regulus couldn't really blame him, though – he *had* ended up with a broken nose the last time he found himself in the company of both Regulus and Potter.

Potter leaned over again. "Might want to practise your shield charm, Black – Davies looks like he's about to explode."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Let's get this over with."

As students rearranged into their groups, Regulus moved toward Isa and Davies, doing his best to look indifferent, while Potter was sidetracked by the Prefect who struck up a conversation.

Regulus and Davies sat down at the far across from each other end of what was normally the Ravenclaw table, their gazes interlocked and cold in some kind of stare-off.

Isa crossed her arms. "I don't know what this is," she said, glancing between Regulus and Davies, "but we're not doing it."

"What is what?" Regulus replied with feigned innocence. "We're not doing anything."

Davies nodded, but not tearing his gaze away from the Regulus. "Yes – we're the best of pals, aren't we, Black?"

Regulus nodded. "Absolutely."

Obviously, they weren't – in an attempt to appease Isa, they weren't outrightly nasty to each other, but the fact that they didn't like each other wouldn't even have gone past Selwyn.

Potter sauntered over, slouching down next to Regulus – looking *way* too amused by this awkward situation. Isa, eager to defuse the situation, unrolled a piece of parchment, placing a quill beside it.

"Alright," she nodded. "So – food and drinks. There's not much we can do with the theme for food and drinks, can we?"

"What *is* the theme, anyway?" Regulus asked, genuinely curious. He had apparently missed that part.

"Unity," Isa answered, avoiding eye contact with anyone and instead keeping her eyes on the parchment in front of her. She was visibly very uncomfortable to sit at a table with her actual boyfriend and the supposed one.

Regulus shrugged. "No point trying to tie food and drinks to 'unity.' Doesn't really make sense. If we'd gotten decorations..."

"Oh yes, because 'unity' is *such* a theme you can express with decorations," Davies interjected dryly, his sarcasm practically dripping.

Potter rubbed his hands gleefully. "Ah, no need for fancy decorations," he smirked, leaning back with that irritatingly relaxed posture. "We'd just stick you two on a stage," he said, nodding toward Isa and Davies. "The perfect embodiment of 'unity,' don't you think?"

Isa's eyes widened in shock, and she turned sharply to Regulus. "Wh - what? You told him? He knows?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, annoyed by the accusation. "I didn't tell him *anything*, Isa."

Potter held up his hands in mock surrender, looking even more amused. "Relax, Nott. Black didn't spill a word. It was mostly the broken nose that gave it away." His gaze slid mischievously toward Davies.

Isa was visibly stressed by the news that Potter knew about their secret, and the fact that the latter looked like he found this situation way too hilarious, probably didn't really calm her nerves.

Once Potter realised this, too, he turned more serious, although still the flickering mischief was obvious in his eyes. "Don't worry, Nott, Davies – your secret is safe with me."

Isa studied him, unsure, then reluctantly returned to the parchment. “Alright. So... normal snacks?”

*****

The terrible ordeal was over soon enough – after an hour or so, they were liberated with the reminder that they only had two meetings left to finish their task, and Regulus walked down the dim, echoing dungeons with Isa in tow. They walked in complete silence, the only sound coming from their shoes moving over the cold, dungeon floors.

“You think he’s trustworthy?” Isa broke the silence eventually.

Regulus shot her a confused look.

“Potter – you think he’s trustworthy?”

Regulus, thinking of all the secrets Potter and he somehow ended up sharing so far, nodded. “Yes.”

“I don’t trust him,” Isa continued, “with his background – *why* did you have to punch him –”

Regulus stopped in his tracks and held up a finger pointedly. “No, no, Ies, we’re not doing this – I had to find out about you two dating for the *entire* year from a bloody drawing –”

Isa sighed in surrender. “Yeah, I know – I’m sorry… I just really wished Potter didn’t know…”

Regulus shook his head in slight disbelief. “But Ies – aren’t people bound to find out?”

Isa shot him a confused gaze. Merlin, and she was *intelligent*. Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Look, now it’s only Potter – but other people are bound to barge into you two in some cupboard sometime–” he tilted his head in contemplation “–where *do* you sneak off to, even?” Isa opened her mouth, but changed his mind and decided he didn’t really want to know. “No, leave it – I don’t want to know – the less I know, the better – but the point is; today it’s Potter, tomorrow it’s going to be someone who’ll blab.”

Isa sighed, sliding down to sit against the wall, in the very spot where Regulus had once sat with Potter after his run-in with Davies. Regulus

joined her on the cold floor.

“I know, Reg,” she whispered, resting her head on his shoulder.

Regulus felt her trembling against him, and as much as he wanted to brush it off, the sight of her quiet tears pulled at his heart.

“Ies,” he murmured, leaning in to her and taking in her comfortable scent. “I don’t know what your plan is, but… they’re never going to accept it. The only way to continue what you’re doing is to get out.” He felt her breath shaking against him as her crying intensified, and he felt a knot in his stomach. It annoyed him that he felt so much sympathy – it’d be so much easier to just feel she deserved the consequences of her reckless behaviour. But she was his best friend – strong and indestructible, and now she was crying. He gently put his hand in hers. “And, Ies,” he continued, his voice soft, “look – Sirius could get out because they had a spare. Andy could get out because she had two equally gifted sisters and well, Aunt Druella couldn’t ever *really* do something to her own daughter…” Isa nodded, crying becoming louder. “But Ies – they’re never going to let you go.” Regulus thought of Magnus Nott, the dangerous and calculating look in his eyes once someone crossed him. “He’s never going to let you go.”

“I – I know,” Isa cried silently. “And I – I don’t want … *out*. But I … I want love.” She looked away, as though the words embarrassed her.

“You’ll find love again,” Regulus said. “You will find love again.”

Isa shook his head. “No, Reg, I won’t. Not like this.”

Regulus had a very hard time suppressing the urge to roll his eyes. “You’re Isadora Nott, there’s not a soul in the right circles who wouldn’t want to have you–”

Isa laughed – a mirthless laugh. “You think that that is *love*?” She had stopped crying, visibly turning frustrated instead. “*Love*? They don’t appreciate anything I offer, instead of my – my body – it’s all about lust –”

Regulus shook his head. “There’s enough people that don’t think like that – that appreciate you for you know, your wit, your personality – not just because you’re beautiful –”

Isa shot him a wry smile. “They would call me a lot of things, Reg, but ‘beautiful’ wouldn’t cross their minds,” she said cryptically. She sighed

and continued. “No, Reg – you don’t get it… you don’t get it because – because you’re an exception. You’re different. And so is he – Nathan. He’s different.”

Regulus was lost for words. He wanted to argue, to convince her that she was wrong — that there were good people out there, good people from pure lineage – but somehow the silence between them felt final, the weight of her words settling between them like a shroud.

So instead, he just sighed, staring at the wall in front of them, while Isa breathed against his shoulder, her tears slowly drying.

*****

Having read a great portion of the libraries held at different estates – Grimmauld Place, Black Manor, Seacliff Hall – and most specifically their history sections, Regulus was aware of the idea of the Butterfly Effect. He hadn’t known it by name, but its essence he had come across on numerous occasions; a small act, seemingly so trivial, having unparalleled, unfathomable effects – a simple deed, a mere movement or gesture, entirely changing the course of time.

Never had he thought, though, to witness this Butterfly Effect himself – to watch it unfold in before him, around him, with him standing in the centre of it all – being the very instigator, the one setting into motion a cascade of events so irreversible and profound that even he, with all his foresight, could not have predicted the full outcome.

Because well, only in hindsight do things reveal their true shape.

It was a Friday evening, and everything had started off as a rather dull and routine night. Isa was off somewhere with Davies, and Melania had dragged Evan along for some date, leaving Regulus in the common room with Barty, Mulciber, and Avery. They were engrossed in speculating about the topics that might come up in the weekend’s *Pure Quill* . Regulus, having written it already, knew they were all wrong but feigned interest, occasionally nodding or muttering agreement while making a mental note of their guesses.

“The ridiculous statue would be a fitting topic,” Avery declared. “Severus suggested it – you know, going over the history and all that.”

“Where is Snape anyway?” Barty asked with a bored look, leaning back in his chair.

Avery shrugged. “Dunno. Haven’t seen him since dinner.”

“Probably off with that Mudblood, then,” Barty said, his voice dripping with disdain.

“Who’s off with a Mudblood?”

The voice made Regulus tense immediately. Dolohov and Lestrange had wandered into the common room, leaving Regulus very uncomfortable. Sure – his nickname had died down a bit, but he’d still rather seize any opportunity to get out of socialising with them.

“Snape,” Barty replied, relocating to the floor to make room for Lestrange on the sofa, who took the spot with a lazy, almost theatrical indifference.

“What’s his deal with her anyway?” Dolohov asked, dropping into an empty armchair across from them, his dark eyes glittering with amusement.

Avery looked wary, clearly reluctant to throw his friend under the bus. “It’s complicated, I guess…”

“He’s on *our* side, right?” Barty pressed, a sceptical look on his face. “I mean, what’s he playing at?”

Lestrange snorted, shaking his head. “Definitely just fucking her.”

Regulus’s stomach turned at the discussion, and his eyes flickered to the exit of the common room – could he feign having to go to the library?

Barty gave a derisive laugh, glancing at Dolohov. “Why would anyone want to shag a Mudblood?”

Dolohov leaned forward, a sly grin creeping onto his face. “You’d be surprised, Crouch. Some of them—” he paused, smirking, “—some of them use their looks to…distract, you could say. Mudbloods and their charms have a way of muddling the minds of purebloods. It’s all part of the deceit.”

“Oh, and trust me,” Lestrange chimed in with a sneer, “Snape’s little pet happens to be quite the looker. Shame, though – such a waste.”

Regulus’s throat went dry – he didn’t feel comfortable talking in the current setting at all, let alone discussing girls or other people’s forbidden loves. Would it be too obvious if he just got up and went to the library? Did he have to explain himself?

Just as he opened his mouth to try, a distraction arrived: two seventh-year girls strode dramatically into the room, catching Dolohov and Lestrange's attention instantly.

"Off to the library," Regulus hissed quickly to Barty. He seized the momentary distraction to slide out of the common room without another word.

He, naturally, didn't have any books on him and he didn't *actually* need books from the library, so he found himself wandering the Castle, subconsciously walking to the familiar classroom on the third floor. The last evening he'd spent there with Potter had been days ago, and they hadn't planned another meeting since and well, Potter was quite a popular bloke, so Regulus was rather surprised to find him there.

Potter looked up from a collection of bottles he was arranging on the teacher's desk, his face lighting up with a smile as warm as the thrill shooting through Regulus as a result.

"Black," Potter nodded in greeting, his eyes glinting with that signature sparkle.

"Potter," Regulus replied, stepping inside and taking in the display of bottles on the desk — Mead, Firewhiskey, and a few other questionable choices. "Don't tell me you're starting a bar on the third floor?"

Potter laughed, clearly amused. "No, Black — I wish. No, these—" he gestured grandly at the bottles, "—are the secret ingredients for the Ball's punch."

Regulus blinked and it took some time to put the dots together."You're spiking the punch?"

Potter looked at him, feigning exasperation. "Obviously."

Regulus scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Of course you are. How did you even get those bottles in here?"

Potter's grin grew mischievous, his eyes twinkling. "Ah, that's for me to know and for you to find out."

"Of course it is," Regulus replied dryly, moving toward a pair of pouffes stacked together. He lowered himself onto them and stretched out, feeling his earlier tension finally begin to ebb away.

“You alright?” Potter asked, a touch of concern in his voice.

Regulus nodded. “Yes.”

“We didn’t set a time for tonight, did we?” Potter asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“No, we didn’t.”

Potter leaned against the desk, his smirk impossible to miss. “So…you were just secretly hoping to run into me?”

Regulus scoffed, though he, at least to himself, had to admit that he was pleased with Potter being there. Still, he tried to sound as casual as possible. “Don’t flatter yourself, Potter. I was just bored.”

Potter’s grin widened as he leaned in, lowering his voice with exaggerated seriousness. “Well then, in that case, we’re clearly obligated to find something entertaining to do.”

“Another screening?” Regulus offered.

Potter shook his head. “No – we’d need new Omnioculars; we’ve watched all the matches twice already.” He trailed his fingers over a few bottles on the desk, theatrically assessing them before snapping one up with a flourish. “How about a drink, Black?”

Regulus laughed despite himself, caught off guard by Potter’s showmanship. “You have a knack for theatre, Potter,” he said, but as the moment lingered, he shifted uncomfortably, casting about for an exit. “But… no thanks – I… I don’t drink.”

Potter’s eyes flickered with interest as he took in Regulus’s expression, which was now fixed firmly on the floor. “You don’t drink?”

“…No,” Regulus said, feeling the discomfort build. He shifted his weight, not meeting Potter’s gaze.

Potter’s eyebrows rose. “That’s funny – I remember quite a bit of liquor at the Slytherin parties…”

Regulus nodded, forcing a shrug. “Well, yes – they all drink, I suppose…”

Potter composed himself quickly, moving to pull open a drawer with his signature smirk. “Well, in that case…” He retrieved a bottle of Pumpkin Juice, pouring two glasses. “I *do* happen to have some

Pumpkin Juice as well."

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "You can drink, you know."

Potter shrugged. "Nah – solitary drinking's a level I don't plan to reach anytime soon." He handed over a glass of pumpkin juice, watching as Regulus took it with a faint smile.

They clinked glasses, and Regulus noticed Potter's contemplative expression hadn't faded. "You must think it's weird."

Potter shook his head. "No – not at all." Noticing Regulus's confusion, he went on. "Alcohol makes people lose control, and it makes sense to stay clear of it — especially in places that feel, you know… unsafe."

This took Regulus off guard – the fact that Potter seemed to put his finger exactly on the reason why he didn't drink and seemed able to put it into words even better than Regulus himself.

"I mean," Potter added, sounding suddenly flustered, "not that I'm suggesting I'm some kind of unsafe environment - but it makes sense."

Regulus nodded, letting Potter's easygoing response settle over him.

"It's good, though," Potter continued thoughtfully. "Standing up for yourself like that, Black. You should never be pressured into anything you don't want to do."

This was another statement that took Regulus off guard – especially as it highly contrasted the pressure of his friend in general to drink, party and whatnot.

Potter didn't let the silence hang long. "So," he said, dragging two pouffes over and stretching out on one to mirror Regulus. "You going to Hogsmeade tomorrow?"

Regulus shrugged, keeping his answer vague. "I might."

There was no 'might', though – he definitely was; he had promised Lucius to meet him there, to – as Lucius had put it – celebrate the Pure Quill's raging success. Regulus hadn't really felt like going to the village, even if it was this term's last visit, but he could hardly decline Lucius's invitation.

"And you?" Regulus asked.

“I guess – Baiss has scheduled the pitch though, in the morning.”

Regulus found his mind drifting back to the last Quidditch match between Slytherin and Hufflepuff – Slytherin had won, which meant, as usual, that the final showdown for the Cup would come down to Gryffindor and Slytherin. Though he repeated his friends’ confident claims that Slytherin would eventually win as Gryffindor was to lose the last match against Ravenclaw, Regulus couldn’t lie to himself – Potter was definitely going to play like a bloody professional and they could actually claim the Cup already.

“Looking forward to the match?” Regulus asked, watching Potter casually flip through a book.

“Sure,” Potter replied, though his voice lacked its usual confidence. He didn’t look up, and the signature smirk was conspicuously absent.

“Potter,” Regulus said slowly, a small smile tugging at his mouth. “Are you… *nervous* about the match?”

Potter rolled his eyes, but the faint blush on his cheeks betrayed him, sending Regulus into a fit of laughter.

“What?” Potter snapped, clearly annoyed.

Regulus looked at him again, struggling to suppress his laughter and failing miserably.

“Piss off, Black,” Potter muttered, clearly unamused.

“Sorry,” Regulus managed, still grinning. “It’s just — *so* unnecessary to be nervous. There is really no one that flies like you – there’s no competition, to be honest – the way you fly… it’s *magic* –” Regulus quickly shut his mouth, realising that he had overshared his praise for Potter. He felt his cheeks flush, and now it was Potter that broke out into laughter.

“Magic you say?” he laughed.

“Oh, get lost,” Regulus bit, his tone sharp but with a reluctant smile.

Potter took in Regulus’s flustered expression with amusement, letting out another laugh. “No, sorry — it’s just nice to hear, actually. Very… reassuring,” he said with a grin. “But I’ve got to admit, no one’s ever called my flying magic before…”

Regulus rolled his eyes, still feeling the heat in his cheeks, and glanced sideways at Potter's face, exasperated yet amused. "It's true, though…"

Potter's smile softened. "Coming from you, I'll take it," he said quietly, his gaze holding Regulus's for a beat longer than expected.

Regulus looked away, feeling his heartbeat quicken. His throat felt dry and he felt the sudden need to put an end to intimacy of the moment, so he rose from the pouffes, pretending to have to put his empty cup somewhere. He put it at the desk and looked at the bottles, then at Potter, casually reading through his book again, still a bit of that flush left on his jaw…

"You know," Regulus broke the silence. "I think I'm going to try for a drink after all."

Potter snapped his head toward him. "What?" he asked, surprised. "What brought that on?"

Regulus shrugged. "Why not – I can hardly dodge it forever now, can I?" he joked.

Potter arched an eyebrow. "If you don't want to drink, Black, you can decide to *never* drink – it's not something you have to 'face oneday', or something. It's your call, always, and if it makes you uncomfortable–"

Regulus stopped him with a hand gesture. "I'm not uncomfortable now, Potter."

He was serious – if he had any doubts about the decision, Potter's encouragement to stick to his ideals got rid of it quickly. Potter studied him for a moment longer before rising and pouring a measure of Firewhiskey for each of them. They held their glasses up, their eyes meeting.

"Santé then, Black."

A while, and several cups of Firewhiskey later, they had sprawled back on the pouffes, laughing with the unrestrained ease that the combination of Regulus, Potter, and the Charms classroom always seemed to evoke – although, now that it also included liquor, it was even better.

Potter was recounting an unfortunate anecdote from one of Slughorn's recent dinners.

“So Slughorn is holding court at the head of the table, talking up his own wit as if he were Merlin reincarnated,” Potter said, still laughing. “And just as he’s launching into some ridiculous story about one of his ‘dear old friends’ —all of whom are apparently *geniuses* — one of his prized soufflés just… collapses on his plate. *Mid-sentence*.” Potter’s shoulders shook with laughter as he tried to get through the rest of the story. “And I had no idea it was Moony — Remus—who’d enchanted it, all part of some ridiculous bet. It was so disastrous that everyone just sat there, like they’d been Petrified.”

Regulus doubled over, laughing so hard he was nearly breathless. “Did anyone even dare to say anything?”

Potter grinned, laughter spilling out freely. “Of course not. Vance tried to smooth it over, but Slughorn was mortified…”

Potter let out another roar of laughter, leaning back and accidentally knocking against the table, sending his book toppling to the floor with a loud *thud.*

“Oh — well, look,” he managed through his laughter, “if you’re ever roped into one of his stuffy parties, just… sabotage the food. Guaranteed entertainment.”

Regulus laughed, wiping at his eyes. “I didn’t think he even invited fifth-years to those things.”

Potter shrugged, still catching his breath. “Sometimes. I was invited, and I’m a fifth-year. But I’d bet he’ll invite you first chance he gets next year — you’re too brilliant not to have already caught his eye.”

Regulus felt his cheeks heat at the praise, so he quickly shifted the focus. “What’re you reading, anyway?” He nodded to the fallen book.

Potter gave a half-shrug, trying to look casual. “Oh, nothing you’d be into — a guide on healing potions and remedies, stuff like that.”

Regulus picked up the book, intrigued, flipping through it as he sank back into his lying position. There were recipes and notes on various remedies, each page detailing different healing potions and ointments. One was a recipe for a Blood-Replenishing Potion, another an advanced Wound-Cleaning Elixir. There were even notes on Murtlap Essence for treating cuts and burns, and a complex guide for brewing a Calming Draught. But one recipe in particular caught his eye – a Numbing Cream.

“Oh, look, this one looks familiar,” Regulus joked, his finger tracing the steps as he read.

Potter cleared his throat a bit too quickly, and reached out as if to grab the book, but Regulus dodged him, curiosity piqued. The recipe was unexpectedly elaborate, each step more intricate than the last. He scanned further, growing more and more confused.

“Potter?” he asked, glancing sideways. Potter looked away, jaw tense. Regulus felt a strange tug of emotion at the detail in the instructions. “I thought the cream only needed twelve hours to mix?” Regulus paused, but continued when Potter didn’t respond. “But then… why does it say you have to ‘let it rest for four hours, then heat and cool it every half hour until the eighth hour, and… stir twice clockwise precisely at sunrise?’” His voice softened, the realisation sinking in.

Potter’s gaze met his again, this time unflinchingly. His deep brown eyes showed a firmness and an odd level of vulnerability. “It says that,” he replied, voice barely a whisper, “because that’s the recipe.”

Regulus’s heart seemed to falter, caught somewhere between surprise and something that felt uncomfortably close to being moved. He swallowed, looking away briefly as he tried to collect his thoughts, then back into Potter’s eyes. “You… you woke up all night for this? Every half hour, and then again at sunrise — just to make this cream … for *me*?”

Potter’s lips curved in a faint, almost embarrassed smile. “Yeah,” he said, a bit of a laugh escaping him, though his eyes stayed fixed on Regulus’s. “Guess I did.”

“But… why?” Regulus asked, his voice a blend of disbelief and something deeper he couldn’t name.

Potter’s smile widened slightly, but he kept his voice steady. “Well, you needed help and I knew you’d never accept it if you knew the actual process of making it.” He paused, running a hand through his hair, looking away just long enough for Regulus to feel the weight of the gesture.

Regulus shrugged and nodded – he probably wouldn’t have. “I guess… But…” he looked at Potter in contemplation, “why bother? You didn’t owe me anything…”

Potter snorted softly. “No – but you needed help…” He trailed off, looking at his hands. “And well – I wanted to see you fly, too.” He

looked up slowly, his gaze steady and intense, making its way all the way through Regulus's eyes right into his soul. "You know, when you fly – that is a little bit like magic too."

Regulus felt the intensity of Potter's gaze, the closeness of his face, the warmth of his body, and in that single beat — when his heart both stopped beating and started racing uncontrollably all at once — he leaned in, his lips meeting Potter's. His hand slipped into his hair, feeling the strands thread between his fingers, and Potter's hands found him too — on his cheek, in his hair, at the back of his neck — though he had no sense of what and where because he was utterly, completely swept away by this feeling, entirely, indisputably lost.

And then – then it clicked.

This was what all the fuss was about. *Now* he understood everyone's obsession with snogging – because this was it, this was *it*. This feeling – both exhilarating and not enough at the same time, impossible to satisfy and overwhelming all at once. His body grew warmer with a sudden hunger; he wanted more – more of Potter's lips, his hands, the closeness. He had been sleeping all his life, and now he had woken up.

This was what it was about.

He was sure that no one understood it though, not truly, not really – because there was no way, no way that anyone, any soul in this world, could possibly kiss like this – so urgently, so deeply, so undeniably. Surely, no one else in the world, absolutely no one, could kiss like–

James Potter.

The realisation struck him – slapped him, sharp and unmistakable, just as Potter seemed to snap out of it too. With a jolt, they broke apart almost violently, each staring at the other, wide-eyed and silent, breathless as if they'd both just done a dozen laps around the pitch. The only sound came from their breathing – rapid and ragged – and they sat there in complete, utter shock.

And then, with one last unreadable look, Potter rose and fled the room.

A small act, seemingly so trivial, having unparalleled, unfathomable effects – just a touching of lips, a graze of tongues, a caressing of hands – entirely changing the course of time.

Fuck.

Chapter 23: Of L-O-V-E and Cups

Having been subjected to many a party, social event, and holiday gathering, Regulus had acquired a fair amount of experience with the art of intoxication, albeit secondhand. He had long ago come to realise that there were distinct types of drunkenness, each with its own kind of chaos. And, unfortunately, he'd had first-hand experience with nearly all of them.

Naturally, there was the aggressive kind — the most common variety, and the most treacherous of all. Regulus had learned early to avoid these types, for they were deceivingly kind and easygoing, right up until a single word or look set them off, sending them spiralling into a fury that simmered beneath the surface. The prime examples of this would, of course, be Mother and Father. One moment, they'd seem polished and indifferent; the next, some stray remark or misplaced gesture would ignite them, filling the room with sharp, hissing words, jinxes and – in case of lost wands – fists. The two of them, after too many glasses and a single wrong comment, always made quite the show.

Then, there were the hilarious and cheerful drunkards — their antics, while unrefined, at least brought some fun to the table of the stifling social affairs. The best example of this category would be Aunt Druella – by her third glass of wine, she'd start in on the most absurd gossip, her laughter loud enough to rattle the chandelier. And as she drank, she'd not only spill half her glass but half her secrets as well, slurred for all to hear with wild abandon. It was supposedly a ridiculous spectacle, but Regulus also found it endearing in some way; there was something harmless about Aunt Druella's brand of intoxication, as if this carefree, foolish side might reveal her true nature. After al, if this was someone's true self, then perhaps they'd be alright.

The melancholic kind were alright, too, for they were kind of predictable. Sirius, in particular, seemed to lean this way; also sober he wore his heart on his sleeve, and liquor only seemed to intensify that. He'd go on, eyes glassy, about memories of the times he and Regulus were supposedly inseparable or about the wrongs of the world. It was all very dramatic and exaggerated, but there was a certain art to this tragic intoxication.

And then, a much scarcer category in the circles in which Regulus mingled, there were the lovey-dovey drunkards; the ones who, after a

drop too much, would declare their undying devotion to anything that crossed their path — finding sweetness in every shadow, beauty in every flaw. The ones who looked at the world, drunk and adoring, like it was the best thing they'd ever seen.

Regulus *very, very* much regretted finding out he apparently fitted squarely into this last category.

Following Potter's flight from the classroom, Regulus had no clue what to do, what to make of this, what to think – and the Bottle of Firewhiskey wasn't finished, so, before he could think of what to do, what to make of this or what to think, he decided that numbing his mind would be the best option. So, in record speed, especially considering his total lack of experience when it came to alcohol, he had downed the remainder of the bottle.

As he took the last few sips, his thoughts flickered to a strange, specific memory of Sirius, one that felt like a lifetime ago, even if it had only been months.

"You'd either have to be the world's biggest liar or the biggest poof if you said you haven't once thought about doing her."

Was this it? Was *this* why he had no interest in her?

Then Isa's words, last week, about all the men lusting after her… "*No, Reg – you don't get it… you don't get it because – because you're an exception. You're different."*

But – she had also said that Davies was different, and *he* wasn't …– but oh shit, but he *did* fancy her – he was different in the sense that he respected her, but Davies obviously *liked* her – that kind of 'different' wasn't the same at all – Davies was shagging her, after all…

Oh, fuck, fuck.

The comments by his Uncle – Uncle Alphard. Saying that Regulus reminded him of himself when he was younger – did he… did he mean *this*? Had he seen what Regulus himself had failed to notice?

All the comments about him being the 'classic' guy – did they, did they just mean …

Oh, no, no –

It couldn't be, right? There were plenty of people that snogged

without having feelings for the other – half of them barely liked each other, and it didn't mean anything — except, well, none of them did it with someone of the same sex, did they? To cross *that* boundary … no one would do that lightly… You'd have to be completely, entirely…

FUCK.

The walls of the classroom seemed to close in on him. The more he thought about it, the harder his heart pounded, and whether it was the alcohol or his own confusion, he couldn't tell — but he had to leave, he had to get the hell out of there.

So he decided to go for a walk – he stumbled through the hallways, mind spinning. Wandering around the castle while entirely plastered was probably a terrible idea, but it barely registered as he walked, thoughts a chaotic blur. It was a bloody miracle he hadn't been caught by Filch or a prefect — especially given that he'd wandered the same corridor five times and managed to get lost on the same staircase *twice* .

So *this* is what being Selwyn must feel like…

Finally, he found his way back to the dungeons, his feet dragging. He stumbled through the common room entrance, barely taking in the room before him — until he heard the voices stop, mid-conversation. He looked up blearily to see Amaryllis, Melania, Barty, Evan and Isa all eyeing him warily as he swayed on his feet, then dropped heavily onto the sofa across from them.

"Evening, folks," he slurred, a lopsided smirk tugging at his lips.

His friends exchanged uncertain glances, sensing something was off, but not quite yet able to pinpoint that Regulus was, in fact, utterly plastered.

"Reg…" Isa began, frowning as she gave him a once-over. "Are you… alright?"

"I," Regulus replied, pointing his finger with dramatic flair, "am *brilliant*. Ab-so-lut-el-y brilliant." He let his head fall back with a contented sigh, as if he'd just declared something profoundly true.

"Black?" Barty asked, glancing from Regulus to the others, barely holding back laughter. "Are you *drunk*?"

Regulus considered the question, looking almost philosophical. "I

don't know, actually… maybe I am…" he answered with a slightly dazed grin.

Barty and Evan erupted in laughter, while Amaryllis and Melania giggled, glancing at each other in confusion, and Isa shot him a concerned look with a reluctant smile.

"Where have you *been*?" Evan managed between fits of laughter.

Regulus, seeming far too pleased with himself, slurred, "That… is for me to know and for you to find out." He gave them a smirk, and Evan and Barty doubled over, shaking with laughter.

"Oh, this is priceless," Evan cackled, "Black, *drunk* — this is *history*!"

Evan's laughing face caught Regulus' wandering attention, and he paused, focusing intensely on him. "You know, Ev," Regulus slurred, nodding as though sharing a very serious insight, "your parents…" Everyone looked visibly confused by the sudden change of topic. "… they're just so… *in love*. And they don't care who sees. It's just so — fucking *brave*, you know…"

There was a moment of stunned silence as his friends processed this, then Evan and Barty burst into laughter again, while Amaryllis and Melania looked at each other with wide eyes, giggling, and Isa hovered awkwardly, not quite sure whether to laugh or step in.

"With all the shit and treason and hate," Regulus continued, undeterred, "and they just — *hold hands at dinner* —" His voice dropped reverently, as if describing something epic.

Barty and Evan were practically in hysterics now. "Always knew you were a romantic sop, Black," Barty wheezed, "holding *hands* at *dinner*…"

"Yes!" Regulus slurred, clapping his hands together. "Love should be celebrated."

He locked gazes with Isa – the exact words she once said, on the balcony at Dreadmoor Keep, overthinking life. Isa's expression softened, and she gave him a small, knowing smile, nodding in silent understanding. The exchange was private, leaving out their other friends – something they noticed but couldn't quite understand.

But the moment was fleeting, and Regulus, suddenly overtaken with a rush of affection, turned back to his friends, his eyes warm and misty.

“You know — you guys, you’re just… the best,” he nodded earnestly, gaze drifting from one face to the next. “Ev, Barty — my best mates… Amar, Melania, always bringing a bit of light and cheer…” His words slurred a bit, but he was unmistakably sincere.

Then he looked at Isa, her warm brown eyes watching him with a mix of humour and contemplation. “And you — Ies…” He broke into a soft, lopsided smile. “I love you, Ies.”

The rest of the group found themselves caught between laughter and a sense of having stumbled onto something unexpectedly private. His declaration seemed so sincere – sure, for Regulus it was completely platonic, but that was something his friends didn’t know. Amaryllis and Melania perched on the edge of their seats, eager to see where this would go. Evan and Barty exchanged glances, faint smirks tugging at their lips but also struck by the sudden, serious turn.

Isa looked both amused and slightly bewildered and she was about to say something, when Regulus, still riding his wave of affection, continued.

“Just, you know… love,” he slurred. “L-O-V-E,” he spelled out with grand, wobbly gestures. “*Love.*”

And with that, the group burst into laughter again, the tension easing as they dissolved into giggles at Regulus’s antics. Isa rolled her eyes, barely stifling her own laugh, and decided that this was the moment to step in. “Alright, Reg, let’s get you to bed.”

Evan and Barty whistled in unison.

“L-O-V-E, Nott!” Barty teased.

“Oh, *shut up*,” Isa bit, a small smile breaking through. She slipped her arm around Regulus’s waist, helping him toward the empty dormitory. As they reached his bed, she knelt to help him off with his shoes and tugged the duvet up around him.

“I’m serious, you know,” Regulus said, his tone more solemn now, his words still slurred but his expression focused. “I love you. Not in *that* way, but does it matter?”

Isa gave him a gentle smile as she smoothed the blanket over him. She tenderly stroked his hair, reassuring him as he drifted further into drowsiness. “No, it doesn’t. *All* kinds of love should be celebrated.”

Regulus let out a soft, contented sigh, purring slightly as her fingers brushed through his hair and along his cheek. His face relaxed as if all the night's worries had settled, but then a thought seemed to catch, halting his peace. "Do you love me, Ies?" he whispered suddenly, his eyes blinking open in an unguarded moment.

Isa paused, then smiled gently. "Of course I do, Reg."

"Would you always love me?" Regulus whispered, his throat gone dry as the haunting thoughts from earlier swept back to him, mingling with the haze of Firewhiskey.

"Of course I will," Isa said softly, her voice warm and certain.

"No matter what I've done… who I am… you'll always love me?"

Isa nodded, the look in her eyes steady but also confused and slightly concerned. "Yes, Reg. I will."

And with that reassurance, Regulus finally drifted off, Isa's words lingering as he slipped into a deep, troubled sleep.

*****

The next morning, Regulus very much regretted his choice to finish off the bottle of Firewhiskey. His skull felt like it was on the verge of splitting in two – the steady, merciless pounding of a very bad decision reverberating through his temples. His throat was so dry it was as if all moisture had been leached from it, leaving a raw, parched ache. And the world... the whole bloody world was spinning.

He tried to curse as he shifted on his pillow, lifting a hand to block the feeble light slipping through the heavy curtains, but all that escaped was a low, pathetic grunt. In a miserable rush, the memories of the night before came rushing back, each one a splash of colour in his pounding mind. The start of it was clear — the endless laughter, the conversations, their references to *magic*… Oh – then the *real* magic, a magic he'd never experienced before… igniting him, leaving him breathless, fire crackling and alive… For a moment, he felt nothing but the buzzing of his body, an unparalleled longing – but then, then the shame rushed in, leaving his throat even drier and churning his stomach.

Fuck.

The rest of the night blurred in and out — flashes of memory, fleeting

and fragmented. He saw the hazy corridor, walls flickering in and out of focus as he stumbled through them. Then came the dungeons, dark and cold. His friends in the common room… Isa's warm, soft hands in his hair.

His eyes snapped open, and his mind snagged on the thought, like a hook. *Love. L-O-V-E.*

"Oh, *fuck*."

The thought clanged around in his head like a bell, absurd and shattering. What a complete, bloody nutter he was. *Love.*

He groaned, burying his face into his pillow, trying to blot out the absurdity of his behaviour.

"Ah!" he heard Barty's way-too-enthusiastic voice from somewhere nearby, like an ice pick to his brain. Regulus winced at the sound. "If that isn't our man of *love* ."

With absolutely no mercy, Barty yanked the curtains open, letting in a torrent of harsh morning light. Regulus dove under his duvet in an attempt to save himself from the obnoxious amount of light trying to penetrate his skull.

"Love!" Evan exclaimed, sliding into the scene, draping an arm around Barty's shoulders with a wide grin. "L-O-V-E. Our dear Regulus in *L-O-V-E.* "

"Oh, fuck off," Regulus groaned.

"Aw, don't be bashful now, mate," Barty said with mock sympathy, trying to pry the duvet back. "We heard it all – the *bravery* of holding hands during dinner–"

"The *celebration* of love–"

"'I love you, Ies'," quoted Barty with dramatic flair, leaving him and Evan howling with laughter.

"What time is it?" Regulus managed to groan from under his duvet.

"Time for breakfast!" Evan replied, grinning with far too much enthusiasm for the early hour.

Regulus groaned again, pulling the duvet tighter over his head. "No breakfast."

“You going to Hogsmeade later?” Barty asked, feigning innocence.

Another groan. “Yes.”

“Well then, you’ll *have* to eat something,” Evan said, sounding almost parental. “Or you’ll drop dead halfway there.”

Regulus let out one more groan, this one especially tragic. “Sounds good to me.”

****

Regulus did have breakfast, though — after he’d thrown himself under a freezing shower and forced himself into his clothes, he managed to shuffle down to the Great Hall; though he was considerably slower than his friends that morning, so he walked alone. The shower had left him steadier, but any attempt to focus his eyes too sharply still unleashed a fresh wave of nausea. It was probably for the best; the pounding head and rolling stomach at least provided a welcome distraction – he was sure that if he’d had his full senses about him, he’d have turned right back around rather than face anyone in the Great Hall. He could endure Barty and Evan’s teasing and probably that of Amaryllis and Melania as well – but it would be harder facing Isa – sharp and seeing right through him if she wanted to. And then there was Potter… the thought of his lips and eyes sent a brief, disarming wave of desire through him – it was quickly quashed though, by the overwhelming feeling of shame that rose in its place. He swallowed – he couldn't bloody deal with this now… He walked toward the Slytherin table looking firmly at the floor, afraid that he’d spot those brown eyes in the crowd and afraid of what they might evoke.

“Morning, sunshine,” Amaryllis greeted him way too cheerfully, as he dropped into the seat across from her, back turned resolutely to the rest of the Hall. The thought of facing Potter on this particular morning was unbearable.

“Morning,” Regulus answered, wincing slightly. He glanced around and, very unfortunately, noted the rather large turnout for breakfast: Melania, Amaryllis, Evan, and Avery on one side, with Isa, Barty, Mulciber, and Snape on the other. Reluctantly, he slid in beside Isa, pointedly avoiding eye contact.

The table seemed to buzz with barely contained amusement as they watched the tension between him and Isa. Regulus rolled his eyes at the obvious glances and turned to his best friend.. “Nott,” he nodded.

Isa struggled to keep a straight face. “Black.”

“Rough morning, Regulus?” Mulciber asked, glancing around at the others, who were already biting back laughs.

“Not particularly,” Regulus lied, reaching for a slice of toast — and missing the plate entirely.

Avery snorted. “You’re looking a little green there, Black. What happened, sleep in the lake?”

The group burst into laughter, and Isa took advantage of the moment to lean in, whispering just loud enough for him to hear. “Or maybe you had a late-night duel — with your pride?”

“Ha ha, hilarious, Nott,” Regulus shot, taking in the sight of a smirking Isa.

“It’s all a matter of *love,* mates,” Barty announced, smirking and nodding theatrically.

“L-O-V-E,” Evan, Amaryllis, and Melania chanted in unison, collapsing into laughter.

Regulus groaned, running a hand over his face. “Yes, yes, go on, laugh it up — get it out of your systems already, will you?”

But his friends only laughed harder, and every so often, one would make hearts with their hands or chant 'L-O-V-E' with exaggerated sweetness. Eventually, though, things returned to normal — no one asked where he’d been the night before, or how he’d ended up so utterly pissed in the common room. Surely Isa knew something was off; Regulus never drank, after all, so ending up in the state he’d been in on a normal, Friday night – well, you’d expect it to ring some bells. Still, she didn’t pry – probably filing the ordeal away as another one of Regulus’s demons that he didn’t want to talk about. Still, it surprised him that she didn’t ask.

He was *very* grateful for it, though – for he had no idea what to tell.

He had kissed a bloke. He, Regulus Arcturus Black, heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, had kissed a bloke. And not just any bloke — James Potter. Practically his mother’s arch-nemesis, the one she blamed for corrupting and polluting her favourite son, the son she’d once deemed the true heir, the one she’d poured all her hopes into… And Regulus had kissed him. Sure, he could chalk it up to

drunken foolishness — a fleeting, rash impulse fueled by feeling unexpectedly understood and moved by Potter. Nothing more than a slip, a stupid, rash, drunk decision… But… could he really?

"You okay, Reg?" Isa whispered.

Aware of the attention on them and not about to reveal anything close to the truth in the first place, Regulus simply nodded. "Yes."

"You going to Hogsmeade today?" Isa asked, her tone casual.

Regulus nodded. He hadn't been explicitly told to keep his meeting quiet, but given that it concerned *The Pure Quill*, a secret project, he kept it vague just in case. "I'm meeting someone."

She nodded knowingly. Although Isa often pushed back against the establishment, it reminded Regulus oddly of the women in the traditional pureblood families who were trained to overlook the private affairs of their fathers and husbands, taught to trust rather than to question.

"And you?" he asked, raising a brow.

Isa shook her head. "Nah, I'll stay in the castle. Still have a couple inches left to write on that Potions essay…"

Regulus smirked. "Right. Getting some extra 'tutoring' from a certain Ravenclaw, I reckon?"

Isa's eyes narrowed to slits, her tone mock-serious. "I might be meeting someone too."

Regulus laughed.

*****

Still feeling the effects of the previous night — and certain it'd take him at least three days to feel right again — Regulus made his way to Hogsmeade on his own. Evan was off with Melania, and Barty had joined a large group, which Regulus had absolutely no desire to socialise with, especially in his rather fragile state. He didn't mind the company of the fifth-years who Barty and Evan often tagged along with; Mulciber and Avery were alright and he had a bit of a soft spot for Severus. The only problems was that Mulciber and Avery also acted as eager lapdogs for Dolohov and Lestrange – and well, those two Regulus very much preferred to steer clear of.

So, now, on his last Hogsmeade weekend of the term, he had decided to go alone.

He walked the winding, cobbled streets, his footsteps echoing through his mind – a dull rhythm sharply contrasting with the chaos of his thoughts. The potential embarrassment of being spotted alone was nearly compensated by the fact that he, on his own, didn't have to conform to any of his friends' plans and could more easily hide somewhere in case fate tried to screw with him and have him run into Potter…

How had it even happened? How in Merlin's name had he ended up kissing *James Potter*? Of all people, of all the people in the castle, in the world – James bloody Potter… the blood-traitor, the Gryffindor to his very core, the one held responsible for tearing Sirius from his birth duty, literally born in Dumbledore's circles… Up until this year, they'd barely exchanged a word… and now, he had *kissed* him–

And *oh, that kiss*…

The thought of it alone hit him with a jolt so strong it seemed to sweep him off his feet, leaving him breathless, his chest feeling tight and his mind rebelling against it, rejecting the thought, then circling back to it all over again. That kiss…

And why … why had Potter kissed him back?

Had he even wanted to? The flash of shame was like ice in his veins – settling as a lead weight in his stomach. Maybe Potter had just been too stunned? Regulus had leaned in so suddenly, barely thinking, hardly knowing what he was doing… The moment had been full of intensity – but could Potter have felt pushed, feeling like he had no choice but to yield?

Dark guilt swelled in his chest. Had he done what he himself loathed most? Had he done what had once been done to him — what had been done to him so many times? The thought cut into him like a shard of glass, and he shivered as he continued down the main street, eyes passing unseeingly over the bright, bustling shop windows. He could hardly bear the shame of it; it felt like it was eating him from the inside – but still, something else lingered…

If Potter hadn't wanted to – why had it felt so… natural, so mutual? Potter's mouth had met his with the same intensity, he had held him with the same inexplicable desire – a shared, breathless impulse pulling them together. And the heat in it – the heat from Potter's

hands in his curls, his thumb gently grazing his jawline. Oh…

Regulus swallowed.

Still, even if Potter had wanted it, Regulus knew he couldn't. He *couldn't* be this, couldn't be that kind of person. He was the heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black — the future of its name, its legacy. There was no possibility, no permission for him to be this. The thought of his mother, learning the truth…

His mind slowly flicked to his conversation with Isa in the Muggle coffee shop in Manchester. Sirius could have never departed slowly – *Regulus* could have before, but not anymore – Sirius was gone now, and he, the spare, was now bound more tightly than ever to his duty, carrying the weight of everything that had once been on his brother's shoulders.

The idea of his mother finding out made his stomach turn, his chest clench with anxiety he hadn't felt in years. He'd perfected every gesture, every word, every aspect of his life to fit exactly as it should. After all that had happened to him, all that he'd put the family through – Seacliff Hall… So much had been sacrificed on his way to getting where he was now.

No.

There was only one thing to do – it was not too late; he could still chalk it up to a stupid, drunk mistake. He was a teenager – teenagers made mistakes, especially when alcohol was involved. There was only one thing to do – smother it, bury it, and lock it away. Whatever had flared up in him in that moment would not, could not, happen again. It didn't mean anything – it was just a stupid, rush of the moment, mistake.

Determined, Regulus took a steadying breath and pushed open the door to the Three Broomsticks. His gaze swept the pub in a quick scan – and he felt immediate relief to find neither his brother nor Potter anywhere in sight. Toward the back of the room, Lucius sat with Corban, the latter already smirking as Regulus approached, giving him a brief wink. Regulus forced himself to ignore the uneasy feeling in his stomach, which only worsened as he walked through the heavy scent of roasted meat and buttered rolls wafting from the kitchen.

"Ah, Regulus," Lucius greeted him, his voice as smooth as ever, gesturing gracefully to the empty seat. "Do join us."

“Black,” Corban drawled, a teasing glint in his eye as he leaned back into his seat. “Seems like someone’s had himself a good night. Another party, was it?”

Regulus snorted, feeling a hint of exasperation at Corban’s knack for noticing everyone’s weaknesses – the man could see through any Hangover Draught.

“Nothing dramatic,” he replied with a shrug. “Just a quiet night, really.”

Lucius tilted his head slightly, studying Regulus with his usual measured interest. “And otherwise? You’ve been keeping well?”

Regulus nodded, trying to keep his expression neutral. “Yes, well enough. Nothing of note lately.”

Corban’s smirk broadened. “Ah, so no Firewhiskey, then?” He caught Madam Rosmerta’s eye, holding up a finger with a wink as he mouthed “Butterbeer.”

As Rosmerta nodded and moved off to retrieve the drink, Lucius leaned in, giving Regulus a faintly amused smile. “Nothing of note, perhaps, but I hear *The Pure Quill* has turned quite a few heads,” he said. “Word of it’s reached the Ministry even. Victor’s been singing your praises — says your insights are razor-sharp and unexpectedly fresh. He mentioned it twice just last week.”

Regulus felt a flicker of pride but quickly brushed it off, shifting slightly in his seat. “It’s nothing, really,” he muttered. “Thorne’s the one guiding me — we put it all together.”

Corban gave a short laugh. “A bit of modesty — how charming. Speaking of charm, how’s the missus?”

Regulus stiffened slightly, keeping his response as neutral as possible. “She’s alright.”

Corban smirked. “When can we expect an engagement announcement?”

Regulus nearly laughed at the bizarre turn of events in his life when his mind involuntarily flicked to yesterday’s events – specifically to a certain someone’s mouth. He composed himself quickly. “No time soon,” he replied vaguely, managing to keep his tone even.

Lucius raised an eyebrow but, sensing the shift, steered the conversation smoothly. “Any thoughts on the upcoming exams? Or the Quidditch Cup?”

Regulus nodded. “Well, the Cup’s all on Gryffindor next weekend — if Ravenclaw beats them, we’re in luck. As for exams, I should be in good shape.”

Lucius gave an approving nod, his gaze sharpening. “And the unity project’s final assignment? Any clearer on what’s expected?”

Ah. Regulus sensed this was the true purpose of the conversation – Lucius’s interest seemed just a touch too keen, his question almost rehearsed. Shaking his head, Regulus replied. “Not much, actually. All they’ve told us so far is that there’ll be an enchanted maze of some kind.”

Corban’s smirk reappeared, and he leaned in, lowering his voice. “And what if I happened to know a few details about this maze?”

Regulus’s brow arched slightly. “You’ve heard more?”

Lucius stepped in with a knowing smile. “Only what a friend of ours mentioned. Apparently, the maze is designed around four themes — each corresponding to one of the elements: earth, fire, water, and air. Each section will test you differently, drawing on spells, creatures, and obstacles unique to those elements… so you’d do well to prepare yourself with that in mind.” He paused, his gaze steady on Regulus. “Think about spells, magical creatures, even potions that align with each category. The more you anticipate, the better.”

The unexpected support caught Regulus off guard — both the information itself and Lucius’s apparent interest in the outcome.

“You… want me to win?” he asked, voice laced with surprise.

Lucius shrugged, though his eyes held a calculating gleam. “Don’t you? It would do well for your name… for the Black name.”

Regulus nodded slowly. Of course, he felt competitive and wanted to win — even if it was a stupid project, he hated the thought of losing. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“That’s the spirit,” Corban smirked, giving Regulus a hearty clap on the back that sent a sharp pang through his skull. Regulus winced, and Corban let out a laugh. “Oh — apologies, mate.”

Regulus managed a faint smirk, pushing back his discomfort.

Once they had finished their drinks, it seemed their gathering had come to an end; Lucius mentioned he had matters to attend to for work, while Corban – very suggestively, of course – hinted he had his own 'plans'. They said their goodbyes and Regulus, feeling relieved, made his way back to the castle, forcing his mind to think about creatures and spells concerning the elements rather than to have his thoughts return to the previous night.

*****

For the rest of the weekend and the following week, Regulus managed to avoid Potter. He had no idea if they'd been in the Great Hall at the same time – he'd made it a point to walk straight to the Slytherin table, keeping his gaze fixed forward and promptly taking a seat with his back to the other Houses. He'd even secured a copy of the Quidditch pitch schedule, ensuring he could leave quickly or join practice a bit later if Slytherin and Gryffindor had back-to-back bookings.

It left him with a dilemma as for the ASS-meeting on Thursday, though; he had never missed a meeting before and he *had* some useful information regarding the maze, but the thought of being with Potter in a classroom… So, in the end, he had decided to skive off class the entire day; it was the last week before the exams, so it was mostly revision anyway, and he figured it would seem more plausible to be ill the entire day, and not just during the ASS-meeting at night.

And well, avoiding him, it was helpful – not seeing him, not being confronted with the sight of his hair, his lips… it made their latest rendezvous almost seem like a distant memory, a dream even – almost.

Now, he could get out of running into him during mealtimes, and he had been able to get out of the ASS-meeting that week, but he could hardly get out of watching the term's last Quidditch match – especially since it'd determine whether it'd be Gryffindor or Slytherin to win the cup; sure, Ravenclaw could *potentially* win it still, but they would have to lead by 400 points or so. And well, they were playing against Potter, so that was never going to happen anyway.

Regulus had considered faking illness again to avoid sitting in the stands with his fellow Slytherins, forced to watch the very person he'd been dodging all week, but he knew Isa was starting to suspect

something. She'd surely connect the dots – two events he'd never missed before, a Quidditch match and class, both skipped. She'd realise who the common factor was, and she absolutely could not piece that together.

So, with reluctance and a heavy knot in his throat, Regulus joined the group heading to the stands on Saturday morning – Isa, Barty, Evan, Amaryllis, Melania, Severus, Avery, and Mulciber were all laughing and bantering as they walked, naturally oblivious to the clash of emotions simmering inside him.

The entire stadium was pulsing with energy – every corner buzzing with a fervour that seemed to hang thickly in the air. Bright Gryffindor reds and Ravenclaw blues splashed across the crowd, banners waved wildly, and chants from each House rippled through the stands, amplifying the chaos – a few Slytherins had even draped Ravenclaw colours over their robes, eager to rile up Gryffindor.

It was the last weekend before exams, so everyone wanted one last taste of excitement before the grind. As they took their seats in the stands, Regulus could feel the fervour of the excitement pressing in, almost dizzying. He slipped into his seat and sighed deeply – just get through this. Seven players per team – that made thirteen players to focus on rather than that one…

But how *hard* it was not to look at him.

When the teams took their positions in the air, Regulus's gaze flicked immediately to Potter. He looked exhilarated, his face flushed and bright, practically spilling over with raw energy. Potter's eyes gleamed with anticipation, and even from a distance, Regulus could sense the restless excitement radiating off him – he was like some untamed force waiting to be unleashed.

The chatter around them died to a buzzing hum as Madam Hooch joined the players in the air. Then, with a piercing whistle, she tossed the Quaffle high above them, and Potter shot forward like an arrow, snatching it before anyone else had the chance to react. The stands erupted in wild cheers, red and gold scarves waving cheerfully.

"Look at that speed!" the commentator cried. "Potter's an absolute star – destined for the pros, if you ask me. Bay must be terrified – I would have been if I were Keeping against him!" And sure enough, in a blink, Potter streaked toward the hoops, faking out two Ravenclaw Chasers and the Keeper before firing the Quaffle straight through the

centre hoop. The Gryffindor supporters went wild, chanting his name as he did a celebratory lap, clapping hands with Sirius, who was laughing and cheering alongside him.

Regulus swallowed. It was almost impossible to keep his eyes off him – he really was *magic* in the air. Every movement was effortless, as if he were born to fly – the broom was simply an extension of him, weaving and diving with unmatched precision. And every time he scored, he flashed that same smile – wide and unapologetically happy, the one that cheered up the entire pitch, the warmth of it literally warming Regulus on the inside. He tried to look away, to focus on someone – *anyone* – else. But how could he? How could he not marvel at him?

Potter scored yet again, swooping into a playful bow that sent the Gryffindor girls into a frenzy, shrieking his name as if he were some kind of hero.

Regulus rolled his eyes. Showoff – bloody well deserved, but a showoff all the same.

He knew Potter had been nervous about this match, but it didn't show. Everything Potter did seemed effortless, every move both graceful and self-assured, yet with a rugged, boyish charm that made it feel natural. It was infuriating – and mesmerising.

As should have come to a surprise to literally no one, Gryffindor eventually won the match and the Cup – they had led by 340 points once the Gryffindor Seeker managed to catch the Snitch and had put an end to their misery. Regulus had known from the start that Slytherin would never win the cup – it was all about the points in the end, and Potter and the Macmillan sisters were indestructible, so well, it had been a done deal.

Still, as they sat down to dinner that evening, Regulus's friends were subdued, downcast from the loss. They'd lost the Cup to the entire House of Gryffindor, yes, but somehow – it felt as though they'd lost to one person alone.

"You alright, Reg?" Isa asked him, casting him a curious glance over her goblet.

Regulus nodded. "Yes, fine – why?"

"You just look troubled," she replied, studying him closely.

“Of course he’s troubled,” Barty cut in. “We’ve just lost the bloody Cup, haven’t we?”

Relieved by Barty’s excuse, Regulus nodded.

“We should’ve joined the team, Barty,” Evan muttered, his gaze fixed on the Great Hall’s entrance, where the Gryffindor team was making their grand entrance, a cascade of cheers erupting as they strode in. Naturally, Potter was at the centre, the rest of the team and their supporters forming a protective circle around him as they made their way to the Gryffindor table.

“We could’ve had all the birds, mate,” Barty said, nudging Evan. “All the bloody birds in the world.”

Evan nodded, sighing as he watched. “Look at them all swooning over Potter. They’re practically drooling — and, well, honestly, who’d even want *him*?”

At that, Regulus couldn’t help himself – though he was sitting with his back to the rest of the Hall, he turned, glancing over his shoulder. Potter had just settled down at the table, Sirius next to him, nudging him playfully. A large group of Gryffindors, along with a few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, were crowding around him, clapping him on the back, exchanging laughs and offering their congratulations.

Potter, looking infuriatingly handsome in a red jumper, his hair still damp from the shower, accepted the praise with a bright, easy grin. He reached for a goblet of pumpkin juice handed to him by a fellow housemate, but just as he lifted it, his eyes flicked up — and met Regulus’s.

In an instant, the noise of the Hall seemed to fade into a distant hum, blending into the background as Regulus’s heart gave a strange, unsteady lurch. Potter’s gaze held his, warm and deep but with a hint of wariness - an unreadable understone that kept Regulus captive, caught in its pull.

Potter’s expression softened almost imperceptibly, the look in his eyes deepening, as though he were contemplating something he hadn’t quite decided. And then there it was – a small, unmistakable smile.

So small, just a little tug at the lips, nothing more than a gentle curve – but it lit up the entire world.

And almost without realising it, Regulus felt his eyes curving in a

small, tentative smile. He gave Potter a brief, almost shy nod, but the message was clear.

Congratulations. You were magic.

Potter's face lit up in response, his eyes holding an answer Regulus felt in his very core.

He – Regulus's pulse quickened as he acknowledged it – *he wanted him.*

Chapter 24: Of Moons & Mazes

Chapter Notes

> One of my favs! I have finished the story, so I will post the remaining two chapters somewhere this week. There will be a sequel (I feel like the story's just started...). Let me know what you think, it's really motivating!

After their moment in the Great Hall, Regulus didn't see much of Potter the following days – exams had taken over, and especially the fifth- and seventh-years were swarmed with their O.W.L and N.E.W.T. examinations. The fifth- and seventh-years were also excused from attending the ASS-meeting on Thursday, leaving Regulus with Selwyn, Coolidge and Khan as Potter was taking his O.W.L.s and Thompson her N.E.W.T.s. Regulus found this rather unfair — after all, the other students also had exams, if perhaps less critical ones — but he was confident he'd pass anyway, so he let it go. And – truth be told – it was rather convenient not having Potter there.

McGonagall had been present for most of the meeting, so Regulus was unable to bring up the focus on the four elements and associated creatures, spells, and phenomena tied to water, earth, wind, and fire. So, instead he pretended to focus on his 'weaknesses', meticulously combing through books for elemental spells and creatures, discreetly listing them on a scrap of parchment. Perhaps next week McGonagall wouldn't be present the entire time and he'd get a chance to gauge the others' familiarity with his list.

The first time that he found himself one-on-one with Potter – other than in his dreams, that fortunately seemed to dull the nightmares but which effects would drown him in the same almost unbearable level of shame – came unexpectedly and, perhaps even more unexpectedly, it somehow involved Severus.

It was the weekend after exams, just before the week off that preceded the final assignment and the Ball. With most students sleeping in that Saturday morning, Regulus had taken the rare opportunity to read undisturbed in the common room. He was nearly finished with the book Isa had given him for his birthday.

The peace was broken when Barty and Evan joined him, looking undoubtedly worse for wear.

“You look like hell,” Regulus noted, eyeing the dark circles under Barty’s eyes and Evan’s glassy stare. “Were you at some party I wasn’t invited to?”

Evan yawned and grinned. “We’d definitely have invited you. The world could use more of your L-O-V-E, Black.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Then why do you both look like you’ve slept for two hours?”

Barty let out a yawn of his own. “We were up a bit late — in the common room with Mulciber and Avery — and just as we were finally heading to the dorm, Snape came storming into the common room—”

“Severus?” Regulus asked, frowning. “*Severus* out at night?”

“Exactly,” Evan replied, clearly exhausted as he sprawled across the sofa, rubbing his eyes. “Not exactly the rule-breaking type, is he? But he was completely out of sorts, agitated, and said he couldn’t talk about it—”

“Right,” Barty added, “just mumbled something about an incident with Potter — and he mentioned ‘Black,’ too. Not sure if he wasn’t allowed to talk about it or just didn’t want to.”

Regulus felt his blood run cold, his heart pounding. Something involving Potter and *himself*? Did Severus… know? *No, no, no* — this couldn’t be happening…

He remembered Potter and Severus’s open hatred for each other and vaguely recalled Mulciber saying Severus was obsessed with Potter’s every move. And just last week, he’d heard that Sirius and Potter had pulled some cruel prank on him — levitating him, stripping his clothes… Was it possible that Severus’s anger at Potter had somehow led him to uncover… *him and Potter*?

No, no, no…

Unfortunately, Severus, likely having been up all night, didn’t appear at breakfast. It wasn’t until lunchtime that Regulus managed to find him at the Slytherin table. Only Mulciber and Avery were there, engrossed in their own conversation, so Regulus knew it was now or never.

“You alright?” Regulus asked carefully, trying to gauge the situation from Severus’s eyes. They were unreadable – resentful and tired,

perhaps…

“Yes,” Severus answered stiffly, his entire posture giving away that he was far from truthful.

“They mentioned something happened between you and Potter…” Regulus pressed, aiming for a casual tone that concealed the desperation burning inside. He *had* to know if Severus had discovered anything about him and Potter. His heart raced; his mind buzzed in subdued panic — *he couldn’t… he mustn’t…*

“That might be the case,” Severus nodded, though he added flatly, “but I have to leave it at that.”

“Why?” Regulus asked, carefully. “Is it that you won’t talk about it… or that you can’t?”

Severus shot him a baffled look — not weird, considering that Regulus normally steered very clear of anything involving his brother’s friends.

“I can’t, apparently,” Severus replied, casting a wary glance to ensure no one overheard. “But I’m sure you can figure it out.”

Regulus felt as if he’d been slapped — *I’m sure you can figure it out.* Of course he could; this was about him — there was nothing much to *figure out.*

Oh no.

Desperately trying to keep his outward composure, Regulus glanced over his shoulder, breathing a little easier when his eyes met Potter’s – sure, he’d been avoiding that gaze for days, but now, he *truly* needed Potter’s attention. Luckily, the raw panic made him numb to any other feeling those brown eyes could evoke.

Potter looked back, his expression questioning, as though silently asking what was wrong.

It didn’t escape Regulus that this was one of the few times he’d seen Potter sitting alone with only that Pettigrew bloke — Sirius and the Prefect were conspicuously absent.

Knowing he had only a moment before Potter looked away, Regulus gave a subtle nod toward the Entrance Hall door, hoping he would catch the hint.

Potter returned a brief, puzzled nod.

“Well,” Regulus said, throat dry, “I’ll see you later, then, I suppose…”

Sure enough, as Regulus paced anxiously up and down the empty room, his fidgeting was interrupted by the sound of Potter slipping through the door. Despite the panic swirling in his chest, Regulus couldn’t help but notice Potter’s tousled hair and the undeniable way he looked — *damn it,* even now. Regulus swallowed hard, willing himself to stay focused.

“What happened with you and Severus?” he blurted out the moment Potter closed the door.

Potter looked taken aback. “Wh-what?”

“What happened with you and Severus last night?” Regulus repeated, his voice tighter, his impatience masking the dread creeping in. “He — he said something happened with you, and it involved me — and I think he knows. *He knows,* doesn’t he?” And then, as the realisation set in, full-blown panic spilled over. “Oh *fuck*, he knows, and he’ll tell Mulciber and Avery, and they’ll tell Dolohov and Lestrange, and then *everyone* will know, and Mother — oh, no, this can’t be happening — *I can’t have this, no*— ”

But then, before he could spiral any further, he felt Potter’s hands clasp his, grounding him. Regulus stopped, momentarily disoriented, his heart leaping at the warmth and steadiness of Potter’s touch.

“*Black!* ” Potter said firmly, his gaze intense, pulling Regulus back to earth. “This isn’t about *us* — this isn’t about *you!*”

Regulus froze, staring at him, utterly thrown. “W-what? But… but he said ‘Potter and Black…’”

Potter took a step back — Regulus couldn’t tell if he was relieved by the distance or not — and rolled his eyes. “Yes — *your brother,* Black.”

Oooh.

“Oh,” Regulus said, letting the feeling sink in that he had apparently completely overreacted and made an idiot of himself. “*Oh…* ”

He looked at Potter then, who stood before him, visibly exhausted and weighed down with something deeper.

“So… what happened?” Regulus asked, his voice softer this time.

“I… I can’t talk about it,” Potter replied, swallowing hard.

“Another one of your pranks?” Regulus asked, eyebrows pulling together in a frown.

Potter shot him a brief, angry glare. “No.” His anger faltered – leaving him to look rather pale and nauseous. “I had nothing to do with it. It wasn’t me — but I can’t talk about it — *Moony* —”

Potter stopped abruptly, clearly aware he’d said too much. He quickly tried to cover his tracks, talking over his slip. “But it doesn’t matter — just know, no one knows about… you know, what happened…”

But Regulus wasn’t going to let it go.

“Why do you call him ‘Moony,’ anyway?” he asked, catching Potter’s slight flinch.

Ah, he was onto something.

“Just a silly nickname,” Potter replied, managing a grin that looked anything but sincere.

Regulus’s mind began sorting through his memories, recalling glimpses of the Prefect — he rarely saw him alone, but he’d passed him in the corridors – a couple of times in the infirmary, like that time he came in with a nearly-dead Evan, and that time he was hit a Bludger – nothing special about him – what was his name again… Remus Lupin…

And then it clicked.

No. Fucking. Way.

Apparently, his thoughts were plain on his face because, in an instant, Potter moved to block the door, standing between Regulus and the exit.

Regulus’s mind raced back — years, even — to Latin class, to his memory of translating *Ab Urbe Condita.* What was that passage? What did it say, again?

The infants Romulus and Remus, abandoned by the river, are said to have been nursed by a she-wolf (lupa) who heard their cries…

No fucking way.

Lupin. Remus. Moony.

No fucking way.

“Black?” Potter’s voice came hesitantly, his hand reaching out as if to keep Regulus from bolting. “Tell me what you’re thinking, please—”

“Oh, oh no,” Regulus scoffed, shaking his head in pure disbelief, a breathless laugh bubbling up, “oh, *no fucking way.* This… can’t be real —”

Potter looked alarmed, panic filling his eyes. “*What* can’t be real, Black? What’re you—”

And Regulus couldn’t hold it in any longer and then – then he erupted into laughter, doubling over with a manic, breathless energy. Potter’s stunned face, his complete bewilderment, only fueled the laughter until Regulus was practically gasping.

“No – fucking – way,” he choked out, almost doubling over. The clearly stunned face of Potter – probably startled by Regulus’s reaction – didn’t help, and left him laughing even harder.

A *werewolf*. Prefect Lupin was a fucking *werewolf*. Dumbledore was harbouring a bloody *werewolf* at Hogwarts.

And he was one of Sirius’s best friends –

And then, he bursted out laughing again – Sirius… oh, if Mother knew – Sirius’s best friends; that daft bloke Pettigrew, Potter the blood traitor, and Lupin the half-breed. Oh, if she only knew –

“*Black!* ” Potter cut in, his tone urgent. “Black! Come back to earth, would you?”

Potter’s posture was still frozen, his arm held out defensively, as Regulus might take off any second.

Regulus took in a deep breath and forced himself to compose. He coughed, clearing his throat.

“So… a werewolf.” He gave a resigned nod, looking Potter squarely in the eye. “Lupin’s a *werewolf* — and… a student… here at Hogwarts.”

Potter sighed, letting his arm drop, his exhaustion evident as he

flopped onto a nearby pouffe. “Yeah,” he croaked, running a hand over his face.

“Who else knows?” Regulus asked, joining him, pointedly ignoring the flood of memories about the last time they’d been together in this room. He shuddered at the thought. “I mean, Dumbledore – obviously – he has to transform somewhere…”

Potter kept his eyes closed, lying on the pouffe. “The Shrieking Shack — it’s where he goes to transform.”

Regulus let out a gasp – *of course* – how fucking brilliant – a supposedly haunted house – but it wasn’t haunted, it was a werewolf…

Potter continued. “The staff knows and — Sirius, Peter, and me — we figured it out in first year.” He hesitated. “And now… Snape knows.”

“*Snape* knows?” Regulus echoed, a spark of unease creeping in.

Potter shuddered. “Yeah… I’m still not sure *what* happened, but your brother… may have *lured him* to the Shrieking Shack last night—”

No way.

“And last night was a full moon.” Regulus’s eyes widened, dread inching up his spine. “Sirius lured him to the Shrieking Shack, knowing that Severus would find himself face to face with a werewolf.”

Potter nodded, his face pale. “Yes,” he replied through clenched teeth.

And then it somehow sank in – the fact that the Prefect – he was even made a bloody *Prefect* – that the Prefect was a bloody werewolf. But he didn’t look very dangerous – just a bit shabby – but more tired than dangerous…

“I don’t get it,” Regulus said, his voice low. “Why would Dumbledore allow a half-breed—”

“*Don’t* call him that,” Potter snapped, fury flashing across his face. “*Don’t* you dare.”

Regulus shrugged. “But he *is,* isn’t he?”

“It’s highly offensive, Black—”

“It’s *the truth*— ”

“*WHO CARES?!* ” Potter’s voice rose sharply. He jumped from the pouffe, his expression furious. “He’s a person — *flesh and blood,* my friend — you have *no idea* what he goes through each month—”

It was as if someone had slapped Regulus in the face – Potter, *Potter* losing his cool – that never happened…

“Alright,” Regulus said cautiously, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “But — *isn’t* he dangerous?”

Potter sighed, slumping back onto the pouffe, looking deflated. “They lock him in the Shack. The only danger he poses is to himself . ”

Regulus nodded slowly, the pieces falling into place. “So what happened after Severus went to the Shack?”

Potter swallowed, a haunted look in his eyes. “Sirius… told him how to get in. Probably thought it’d be funny — until he realised that he’d definitely test it and…” He shuddered, his face paling further. “*So close* – it was so close…”

Regulus was struck by the helplessness, the sheer shock written on Potter’s face. For a moment, he almost leaned in, almost reached out to touch him, close the distance — but he stopped himself. How he wanted to – but he couldn’t cross that boundary again…

“So how did Snape get out?” Regulus asked, regaining his composure. “Once he’s face-to-face with a wolf… he’s done for.”

Potter glanced at him, looking drained. “I… I pulled him out.”

Regulus tilted his head, eyebrows lifting in surprise. “You went *after him*? Knowing there was a werewolf on the other side of that door?”

Potter sighed, his voice tired. “What was I supposed to do, let him…?” His voice trailed off as he shook his head. “It was… *so* close.”

Regulus let out a small, incredulous laugh. “You fucking Gryffindor.”

Potter turned, raising his eyebrows. “What?”

Regulus shook his head. “You *fucking Gryffindor.* ”

Risking your own life to save your enemy. Definitely sorted right.

“Stupid,” he scoffed, a smirk forming. “But brave.” Regulus caught Potter’s gaze, his brown eyes deep and worried.

They both looked away, clearly remembering the last time they’d been here together. Regulus felt a warm, insistent pull in his chest — a warning he couldn’t afford to ignore.

Regulus cleared his throat, forcing himself back to the topic. “So… Lupin was bitten. When?”

Potter hesitated, his expression a mixture of caution and exhaustion. “Yes – you can’t tell anyone.”

Regulus quirked an eyebrow. “That Dumbledore allowed a *werewolf* to attend Hogwarts – made him a *Prefect*, even?”

“Yes,” Potter said with a firm stare. “People wouldn’t understand. They’d just think he’s dangerous—”

“Which he *is,* Potter,” Regulus interrupted. “Werewolves are dangerous, out of control — they can’t be trusted once they’re transformed.”

“Which is why all the necessary security measures are taken–” Potter snapped.

“And yet, tonight, two students almost got killed – among whom one of the wolf’s best friends–”

“*Don’t* call him that,” Potter snapped. Then he sighed. “But yes – Sirius… he had no idea… probably still no idea what he has done…”

Typical. The action had Sirius written all over it; reckless, thoughtless, probably a rushed decision that had people almost killed. So bloody typical – Regulus had even warned Potter for this.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Potter pressed again. “You – you can’t.”

He took in the pleading, begging eyes of Potter and his head flipped back to the many secrets Potter had somehow discovered – the potions, the Boggart, the lashes, Isa and Davies… He sighed – he couldn’t bloody refuse now, could he?

“Alright, Potter. I won’t tell anyone.”

Potter’s gaze lingered on him a moment longer, as if assessing his sincerity, and then he turned his face back to the ceiling.

“He was bitten when he was four,” Potter murmured.

Regulus’s stomach churned. Four years old. Surviving a werewolf bite at that age…

Then, a thought struck him. “And… they named him *Remus* even before that?” he asked, stifling a scoff.

Potter looked very confused. “Yes – obviously – why?”

Calling your child *Remus* when his surname was *Lupin* – well, they sort of had it coming, hadn’t they? Given the sensitivity of the topic, though, Regulus decided not to share the thought.

“No – just… a thought. Never mind.”

They both lapsed into silence, each lost in thought, the heavy weight of secrets and revelations settling over them. Regulus found himself almost drifting off, lulled by the quiet.

Potter’s voice broke through the silence, barely a whisper. “Are we… going to talk about it?”

Regulus took a breath, bracing himself, but didn’t respond.

“You know – about what… happened,” Potter continued carefully.

Regulus swallowed. “I – I can’t, Potter.”

He wanted to say so much more – he wanted to tell him that he hadn’t been able to think about anything but that kiss – that it left him breathless just thinking about it, that he couldn’t even formulate a thought just thinking about the feeling of Potter’s lips, or his hair, or his surprisingly gentle hands. He wanted to tell him that Potter visited his dreams every night, that he wanted *nothing, nothing* more than just to turn left and feel Potter’s lips on his again – and that he didn’t want it to stop, ever.

But he couldn’t.

“I – I can’t.”

“Alright,” Potter said with a small voice. “We’ll just… move past it.”

Regulus swallowed hard, finally daring to look at Potter — those worried, beautiful brown eyes, that untamed hair.

“Alright,” he whispered, nodding. Then he turned his gaze back to the ceiling, both of them lost in silence once again.

*****

While his friends were off having the best of times in their final week at Hogwarts – splashing around in the lake, plotting pranks for the Ball, and betting on whom they'd snog before term's end – Regulus had quite a full schedule. He had discreetly shared his information about the maze with Potter, and together they subtly nudged the group’s focus toward the actual assignment. Especially Thompson and Khan seemed puzzled by their sudden change of tactics, but as they'd been floundering around with aimless ‘weakness’ spotting and ‘improvement’, they followed along willingly enough. With the final task set for Friday, they’d taken to meeting daily to go over fire-casting spells, Bubble-Head Charms and the like, which left little room for Regulus to relax with his friends. Because Lucius was right – Regulus *wanted* to win.

On top of all this, he still had the last Pure Quill Bulletin to write and one last meeting with Thorne, scheduled for Wednesday evening. Despite growing accustomed to these private sessions, he always felt a flicker of anxiety before knocking on Thorne's office door, and this time was no different. Right on the stroke of eight, he stepped inside.

“Good evening, Mr. Black,” Thorne said with a smirk.

“Good evening –” Regulus began, but his voice trailed off as he took in the sight of the room. Thorne’s office, usually cluttered with stacks of books, maps pinned on walls, and strange artefacts, was stripped bare. A large, battered trunk sat atop the sofa, half-packed, with books, quills, and curious trinkets peeking out, clearly ready to go.

“You – you’re leaving?” Regulus asked, startled.

Thorne’s smirk grew as he drew out his cigar, lighting it with a snap of his fingers and exhaling a swirl of smoke. “Obviously. Wouldn’t dream of spoiling the hallowed tradition of Defense professors lasting a single year, now, would I?”

“But… but *why*?”

“Oh, I have other, more… pressing matters to attend to.” Thorne’s eyebrow quirked as he examined Regulus. “The upcoming years will keep me thoroughly entertained, I assure you.”

Regulus narrowed his gaze, intrigued but reluctant to probe too directly.

“Now, now, Mr. Black. No need to despair,” Thorne continued, a gleam of challenge in his eye. “The Pure Quill will live on. In fact, I suspect we’ll be seeing each other often — perhaps even outside these familiar walls. After all, the Quill is a responsibility, wouldn’t you agree?”

Thorne leaned back, a mischievous look in his eyes and a playful smirk on his face. “And next year, I daresay, holds an exceptional opportunity for you. New surroundings, a touch of the French… I suspect you’ll find it to your taste.”

Regulus blinked. “A touch of the French? What – what do you mean?”

Thorne waved a hand dismissively, as if to swat away irrelevant questions, with that same smirk plastered onto his face. “Ah, patience, Mr. Black. You’ll uncover it soon enough. For now, let’s attend to the present. The latest issue of the Quill — is it ready?”

Regulus nodded, pulling out the draft and passed it over. Thorne took it with a practised flick of his wrist, settling back in his chair as he scanned the parchment, the cigar between his teeth, his sharp gaze gliding over each line.

A satisfied smirk crept over his face. “Ah, yes… your edge is showing nicely here. This piece on the Ministry’s so-called ‘security measures’ — for most students, it’ll be the first time they’ve questioned their parents’ cosy view of the Ministry.” He nodded, pausing to let the impact sink in. “And here, your exploration of the Dark Arts… sharp work, Mr. Black. You’ve clarified that ‘dark’ has little to do with ‘evil’ and much more with politics than students realise. Bold, refreshing. Students who are beginning to notice the cracks will find much to think about.”

A thrill shot through Regulus at Thorne’s praise – sure, compliments from his Professor weren’t a rarity anymore, but it still felt good to have his work appreciated by someone who actually knew what he was talking about.

Thorne nodded approvingly, folding the parchment with an almost reverent care before slipping it into his case. “I’ll see the Quill lands in eager hands by tomorrow. It should spark a few… discussions.”

After a pause, Thorne’s eyes narrowed, as if struck by a thought, and

he fixed Regulus with an assessing look. “Tell me, Mr. Black… have you thought about continuing the Pure Quill over the holidays? There are minds worth reaching, even while Hogwarts is away. We could arrange a subscription service — I’d wager there’s demand for an alternative voice.”

Regulus’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, but he nodded. “Yes… yes, I could.” The thought of circulating the Quill’s ideas beyond Hogwarts — ideas that might disrupt his classmates’ family narratives — it was genius.

“Very well,” Thorne murmured with satisfaction, folding his hands. “If students only read what their parents put in front of them, they’ll grow up as narrow-minded as the adults surrounding them. There’s value in offering a taste of truth… and, naturally, a dash of wit.”

Regulus allowed himself a small smile, but Thorne leaned in, his eyes sparking with amusement. “And wherever you’ve picked up this wit, Mr. Black — I trust you’ll keep frequenting your usual… sources?”

Regulus froze, a small smile spreading as he realised Thorne was referencing his Muggle bookstore visits. “Of course, Professor.”

Thorne’s smirk deepened as he leaned back, an expression crossing his face that Regulus could only describe as rare, and strangely sincere. “In all seriousness, Mr. Black… I don’t often encounter students with your sense of duty — or your… perspective. You’re going to go far.” He let the words settle, his gaze unwavering. “And I intend to see every step of it. Perhaps not in the classroom, not precisely… though I wouldn’t say we’re done with those roles just yet.”

Regulus’s brow furrowed slightly, intrigued. Thorne only smirked, a glint of something conspiratorial in his eye. “Oh, well, you’ll see soon enough. It would be a shame to let a mind like yours wander off unobserved.”

*****

On Friday morning, the Slytherin dorm was still deep in sleep, so no one was there to wish Regulus luck or wave him off as he dressed and headed for the Quidditch pitch at the unholy hour of nine o’clock. They’d been discussing the latest issue of *The Pure Quill* until late, and he barely had time to shower before sprinting out, skipping breakfast entirely. He hoped that the maze wouldn’t take too long - he could hardly lose this stupid project because he fainted at some critical moment.

As soon as he arrived at the pitch, he saw Khan, Thompson, and Potter already waiting, with McGonagall looking brisk and sharp as ever.

Now, Regulus had soon come to realise that Potter's definition of 'moving past it' didn't really correspond with his; sure, he kept his distance, they hadn't once brought it up, but it was very clear that Potter tried everything to get under Regulus's skin – and the best way to do that was through shameless flirting and giving this bizarre – and honestly, rather grave – situation a humorous twist.

Bloody Potter finding something hilarious in everything.

This morning was no different. Potter had the tendency to stand out wherever he went, but now he was impossible to miss. He wore Muggle jeans and a fitted black t-shirt that clung to his shoulders, emphasising every inch of his physique. Regulus rolled his eyes – of course Potter had to look bloody irresistible on a Friday morning.

"Morning, Black," Potter greeted, his smirk as mischievous as ever. He leaned in, his eyes sparkling. "I got enough of a lecture from McGonagall already about my 'relaxed attire,' so if you're thinking of chiding me, you're out of luck." He bit his lip in that maddening way that made Regulus momentarily forget how to speak.

Regulus cleared his throat, keeping his expression neutral. "Obviously."

Potter's eyes glinted with amusement as he leaned in again, whispering, "But I take it you like my 'relaxed attire,' don't you? Or is the hungry look just because you've missed breakfast?"

Regulus wasn't sure whether to laugh or punch Potter in the face. Whatever he was doing was entirely irritating. And entirely effective.

"I haven't had breakfast yet," Regulus shot, irritatedly but also earnestly.

Potter grinned, producing a couple of toast slices wrapped in a napkin. "Lucky you, then. I saved some for you."

Regulus rolled his eyes but took the toast, stifling a smirk. "Of course you did."

"Not the politest 'thank you,' Black, but I'll take it," Potter replied, his smirk only growing as Regulus took a bite.

Just then, McGonagall cleared her throat and called the group to attention. Once Coolidge and Selwyn arrived, McGonagall explained their task. “You’ll be timed as you navigate through the maze,” she said. “You will face challenges involving creatures, spells, and trials based on the four classical elements. The sooner you finish, the higher you’ll score. So, speed matters — but so does cooperation.”

“Understood, Professor,” Potter said with gleeful enthusiasm, wand already in hand, the toast dangling from his fingers. Thompson, Khan, and Coolidge laughed at his excitement, while Regulus bit his lip to hold back a laugh, and Selwyn only blinked, still looking half-asleep.

They stepped forward and were quickly swallowed by the dense, ancient forest. The ground pulsed subtly beneath their feet, as though the earth itself were alive. A glance back showed the forest had closed behind them, sealing them in. The outside world fell away, leaving only the rustling of leaves and the distant chirp of hidden birds.

“Creepy,” murmured Selwyn, her usual aloofness softened by nerves.

“We’ll be fine, Sabrina,” Coolidge reassured her.

Potter shot Regulus a suggestive look wiggling his eyebrows. Regulus snorted.

“Charming, Black,” Potter said with mock formality.

“Oh, toss off, Potter.”

The ground shifted as they ventured deeper into the forest. Thick, gnarled roots twisted through the soil and occasionally surged upward, trying to trip or ensnare anyone not paying close attention. Grumblers — small, mole-like creatures with keen senses — scurried beneath the roots, detecting the vibrations of careless footsteps and causing minor tremors when they were disturbed.

“Don’t move too quickly,” Potter whispered, sounding focused. Fortunately, they had come across the creatures during their preparations. “They react to movement and sound, remember?”

Coolidge, a bit overexcited, attempted a *Vinculum Herbivicus* binding spell to stop the Grumblers, but the spell backfired, binding his own feet instead. He let out a yelp, nearly toppling over as the roots tightened around his ankles.

“Brilliant move, Coolidge,” Potters smirked, but he quickly helped

untangle him with a Severing Charm.

“Sorry – sorry, I forgot… what was it again…”

“You know, Coolidge,” Khan said encouragingly.

Regulus rolled his eyes at Khan being the complete Hufflepuff, but then chipped in, himself: “You practised it with me and Potter, remember?”

Coolidge’s face lit up as he nodded, then took a deep breath and cast *Lux Agrestis*. A soft, greenish glow settled over the forest floor, creating a pathway through the roots. The Grumblers calmed instantly, allowing the group to pass unharmed.

“Nicely done, Gregor,” Thompson said kindly, patting Coolidge on the back.

Coolidge looked ready to burst with pride, and Regulus rolled his eyes but gave him a small nudge forward. “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

The Grumblers, the winding path and earthy atmosphere made it clear they were in the maze’s earth section. Along the way, they encountered small, chittering creatures camouflaged in vines and underbrush, requiring careful observation and quick *Caelus Protectiva* spells to navigate. After handling a particularly obstinate root that shot thorny vines in their direction, they noticed that the ground underfoot began to feel smoother, the air cooler, signalling a shift.

Then they reached a wide, dark pool, its surface so clear it reflected every face looking into it. Beside the pool stood a weathered stone plaque with an inscription: *Only the one willing to bare all, body and soul, shall pass.*

In the water’s still surface, they saw not only their reflections but strange distortions — fragments of thoughts, as if the pool could read into their minds.

“There’s a key at the bottom,” Khan observed, squinting into the depths. “Someone has to swim down to retrieve it — and without magic, I think.”

Regulus immediately felt a tightening in his stomach. Diving into this eerie pool was one thing, but knowing it could read into their thoughts and anxieties was another, especially given he was surrounded by people. The entire group glanced around at one

another, all equally hesitant, as if waiting for someone else to volunteer.

Finally, after a tense silence, Potter shrugged. “I’ll go,” he said lightly. He handed his toast to Regulus with a smirk. “Hold onto that for me, Black.”

And then he, shamelessly, without any warning whatsoever, stripped off his shirt, dropped his wand, and then peeled off his jeans, leaving him in nothing but his boxers. Khan and Thompson exchanged a glance, looking away with a touch of embarrassment, while Selwyn blinked, her expression unreadable.

Regulus locked his gaze on Potter’s face, determinedly ignoring any impulse to glance lower, though it took every ounce of restraint.

Potter gave a quick wink, then dove into the water in one smooth movement, sending ripples across the surface. As he swam deeper, Regulus could barely see him in the shadowy depths, just the faint outline of his form. But then the water began to echo with low, strange whispers, as if the pool were speaking directly to Potter.

The words were unclear to Regulus, but it seemed obvious they were meant to distract or discourage him. Potter’s strokes became slower, his outline wavering, as if the whispers were getting through to him.

Regulus acted on impulse. He took a step closer to the edge of the pool and raised his voice, feeling a bit awkward with the others listening but well – who bloody cared anymore. “No matter what they’re saying down there, Potter, don’t listen. Just — focus on the key. None of what they say changes who you are. Just keep going.”

When Potter’s strokes didn’t seem to quicken, Regulus kept going. “I don’t have the bloody cheesy words for you, Potter, but I’m sure your mum’s showered you with enough of them. Think about her — what she’d say, how she believes in you.”

For a beat, everything was silent. Then, through the dark water, Potter’s outline moved faster, his strokes stronger, as if something had indeed reached him. Moments later, he resurfaced, clutching the key and catching his breath with a triumphant smirk. As he cast a drying spell and slipped back into his clothes, he tossed the key to Khan. The pool dissolved, the eerie reflections vanishing as the path continued forward.

Potter leaned close to Regulus, murmuring with a small smile, as if

still recovering from the words he heard in the pool, “Clever. Bringing up my mum.”

Regulus shrugged, hoping his face didn’t betray any hint of satisfaction.

“‘I don’t have the bloody cheesy words for you, Potter,’” Potter mocked lightly, shaking his head with a laugh.

But before Regulus could respond, they found themselves stepping into a corridor ablaze with heat and light, flames flickering up along the stone walls, casting an intense glow over everything.

“No prizes for guessing the element we’re dealing with now,” Thompson sighed.

Small, flame-like creatures — Emberlings — danced along the path, their eyes like burning coals, and fiery birds circled above, watching with sharp, vigilant eyes.

“Stay steady,” Khan warned, eyeing the Emberlings cautiously. “They’re reactive to sudden movements.”

Thompson attempted a basic fire-shielding charm, but the Emberlings flared up as if it were a challenge, brightening in agitation. Potter countered quickly, casting a cooling charm that sent a brief wave of chill air through the corridor, soothing the creatures just enough for them to proceed.

As they neared the end, however, two Emberlings flared – blocking Potter and Regulus while the others slipped past. Regulus reacted instantly, casting *Protego Calidus*, a charm that shielded them from the creatures’ searing heat. The Emberlings flared in response but ultimately retreated, allowing the pair to continue.

“Nice work, Black,” Potter said, with a quick nod of approval.

Regulus had just managed a terse nod in return when it dawned on him; they were cut off from the others. Their path back was completely obscured by a wall of Emberlings and fire — leaving them very much alone.

“Shit,” Potter muttered, Regulus’s thoughts exactly. “I suppose…we keep moving?”

Regulus scanned the path ahead. “Yeah. They’ll be alright — Coolidge

and Selwyn have Khan and Thompson – they're capable enough. We'll just need to move quickly and get to the end."

"Alright, then." Potter stretched his arms with a lazy smirk. "Guess it's just you and me now, Black. *Cosy*."

"Careful, Potter," Regulus replied, tone firm but not unfriendly. "We're being timed and probably *watched*."

Potter wiggled his eyebrows in a familiar way, leaning just close enough for Regulus to catch his teasing grin. "Then let's move swiftly, Black."

The path that followed very much underscored how Regulus and Potter had grown familiar to each other – as they navigated deeper into the corridor, they encountered a series of fiery challenges that very much tested their teamwork. First, they had to dodge spinning flames that shot out from the walls, requiring them to time their movements perfectly. Then they faced a series of fiery obstacles — walls that ignited in bursts of fire at random intervals, forcing them to find a safe rhythm through the flames. They worked in tandem, casting shielding spells just in time to absorb the heat and protect one another from being scorched. They also spotted Emberlings flitting above them, flickering like fireflies, their laughter sounding like crackling flames, testing their nerves. At one point, they came across a small flame that morphed into a roaring fire serpent, its eyes glimmering with malice. They needed to combine their magic — Potter used a freezing spell to encase the serpent in ice, while Regulus followed up with a binding charm to immobilise it, allowing them to move past unscathed. Regulus was positive that if they'd faced these challenges at the start of the year, they wouldn't have crossed more than a couple of yards of the maze.

Perhaps there *was* something to this stupid project after all.

Then, all of a sudden, Regulus found himself standing alone in a dimly lit chamber. Shadows clung to the walls, and the air was thick, vibrating with faint, echoing whispers that drifted from all directions, as if the room itself were alive with memories. It took a moment for him to realise he recognised some of these voices — Isa's, though it was no longer warm and familiar but cold and aloof; Mother's clipped, sharp tone with its familiar edge of disapproval. A chill ran down his spine as Sirius's familiar laugh echoed from somewhere behind him, morphing into something darker, twisted, before it was sliced apart by Bellatrix's mocking, manic cackle, and then… then *his* voice, but not

like it used to be – it wasn't warm and appreciative, it was mocking and *cold*.

All colour drained from Regulus's face.

This was cruel. *Just* a stupid, stupid school project, and yet they'd turned it into psychological warfare – dredging up his darkest fears, his most secret demons.

No. It was so *wrong*.

"Let's just move, Black," Potter said, eyeing Regulus warily. His voice was low, steady, but Regulus could sense the unease beneath it. Potter was undoubtedly tormented by his own whispers and voices, but he likely had less to worry about in life, so his demons probably wouldn't be as bad.

Regulus's throat felt tight and dry. He nodded. Yes — just move. Don't let them get to you.

The first words he heard were Isa's, filled with unspoken disappointment. *"I'm too good for you, Regulus. You were never enough – I needed someone whole, someone strong and deserving of me. But you? You're broken, Regulus, you're torn, damaged, defiled… It's not your fault; it's just who you are. We can't be friends, not if it means dragging you down with me."* Her tone was calm but cold, each syllable like ice burrowing into his chest.

Regulus felt himself reel from the impact, barely able to catch his breath before his mother's voice rang out, unmistakably icy and unrelenting. *"You're an embarrassment to our blood, Regulus. You'll never measure up to him. He's the true heir. He's everything I could have wanted. You? You pale in comparison, Regulus. You're nothing but a shadow in his wake, and you know it. After all you've put us through, after all that's tainted… Nothing more than a disgrace, an embarrassment…"* Her disdain was suffocating, coiling around him like a rope, squeezing with each bitter word.

He knew it was true – he'd never *truly* be the heir. Even now – Regulus was sure that if Sirius showed up on Mother's doorstep, she'd still take him back. Sirius had it, Sirius was it – the real, true embodiment of the House of Black. And oh, how he had disgraced the family, stained the legacy… *Seacliff Hall…*

He had no time to overthink any of it though, for then came Bellatrix, her tone sharp and twisted. *"You think you can escape, Regulus? You're*

weak — just like the rest of them. I can take everything from you and you'd let me, wouldn't you? You're a coward, hiding in the shadows, too scared to embrace the darkness that should be your legacy. Look at you — pathetic and lost – I know all of your secrets, Reggie, and I am not afraid to use them – I will use them whenever I see fit – I will use them as I please – because you've been such a naughty boy, haven't you, sweet Reggie?" And then she laughed – the sound cut through him like a blade, fierce and mocking, igniting a simmer of panic beneath his skin.

In between these tormenting words, he heard Potter's voice, steady and urgent, cutting through the haze. "Black, don't listen to it! Keep moving. Think – think of my mum — what she would say – what you think my mum would say…"

But the encouragement felt distant, almost drowned out by the chaos swirling in his mind. He felt defeated, the weight of the whispers pressing down on him, threatening to crush his resolve. But he knew he had to persist.

He steadied himself, forcing himself to stay upright, to face the final wave of whispers — the one he dreaded most.

"It was all a lie, Regulus. You never meant anything. You weren't good enough. You weren't wonderful. I tricked you, you know that, don't you? I only wanted what was mine to have, and I took it from you. You're worthless — just as worthless as all the times I touched you. You're disgusting – just as disgusting as my breath felt against your neck. You're repulsive – just as repulsive as the things I made you do. You'll never escape it, Regulus. You will never escape me – no matter how fiercely you fight – no matter how hard you run – no matter how deep you drown – I am part of you. I will always, endlessly, be a part of you."

His voice.

He hadn't heard that voice for so long. Yes, he had heard it at night — the echoes of his past whispering through his mind — but this felt different. This was real, it was here — piercing and relentless, echoing in the dim chamber. He hadn't heard it for so long, so close, so clear, so undeniably real…

Regulus's stomach churned violently, the weight of the words coiling around his heart, squeezing tighter and tighter. Each accusation was a thorn digging deeper into him – reminding, reminding him of what he had done, and reminding him of what he had allowed him to do – every shameful secret he had buried.

Just as worthless as all the times I touched you.

Just as repulsive as the things I made you do.

“Get going, Black!” Potter’s voice cut through the fog, but Regulus felt rooted to the spot, as if that voice had paralysed him, held him captive.

That voice…

Just as disgusting as my breath felt against your neck.

“C’mon, let’s go.” Potter’s hand settled on his back, firm yet gentle, grounding him with its warmth. “Almost there — just keep walking, Black.”

I will always, endlessly, be a part of you.

The warmth from Potter’s touch pierced the ice clinging to Regulus’s insides, snapping him from his trance. He blinked, nodding absently. Keep walking.

He shuddered, but kept walking, still feeling Potter’s warm hand guiding him forward. And then – all of a sudden, they were back in a large opening within the maze – the clear centre of it. The whispers faded, the walls seemed to rise higher.

Regulus gasped for breath, trembling heavily, trying to ignore the weight of Potter's worried gaze, which felt as if it pierced through to his very soul.

“You alright?” Potter asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Regulus tried to answer but turned away just as his stomach twisted again and then, he vomited. It came up like a violent flood, a rush of everything he had been forced to swallow down in his life.

“Oi, Black,” Potter murmured, a gentleness lacing his tone. He stayed a few feet away, tactfully giving him space. “Hey, it’s alright. Just let it go.”

Once Regulus had finished and cleaned up the mess with a flick of his wand, Potter reached down, helping him to his feet with a reassuring grip.

“I’m sorry, you know,” Potter whispered. Regulus, confused, looked sideways, taking in Potter’s brown, concerned eyes. “I’m sorry …

things happened to you."

Regulus swallowed and his throat was so dry he couldn't possibly respond; though, frankly, he was lost for words anyway – the flood of emotions was too overwhelming. He was still trembling from the voices and the truths they had spoken, and most importantly, he felt ashamed – ashamed for who he was, what he was, what he apparently had become, ashamed to be weak, to be like this in front of bloody Potter – Potter, to whom everything came naturally, effortlessly, carelessly. Potter who had seen Regulus too often, too vulnerable.

He shuddered again.

"Also," Potter continued, his voice growing frustrated, "I don't understand why they have to include this psychological crap."

Regulus let out a mirthless snort. "Copy that."

Just then, footsteps signalled the arrival of the others, and their group began to trickle into the clearing.

"Ah, you made it out alive," Potter said, his tone overly enthusiastic, clearly masking what had just transpired between them.

"Yes, you too, I see," Thompson added with a relieved smile.

The group turned, noticing a small statue at the centre — a serpent, lion, eagle, and badger intricately intertwined.

"How original," Potter said dryly.

"I like it," Coolidge chimed in.

"Of course you do," Selwyn muttered with a hint of sarcasm.

"Well, I suppose we're supposed to touch it, aren't we?" Khan suggested, eyeing the statue warily.

With nods of agreement, they gathered around the statue, each placing a hand on it. The instant their hands made contact, a jolt of energy surged through them, transporting them back to the familiar grounds of the Quidditch pitch. The maze, the whispers, the torment — it was all gone. They were done.

Regulus let out a breath, relief flooding through him as Professor McGonagall approached with a small, approving smile.

“Well done, all of you,” she said, her tone brisk yet warm. “Your perseverance in the maze was admirable. The judges will review each of your performances, and the results will be announced at tomorrow night’s ball.”

With a slight nod, she dismissed them, and the group began to disperse. Selwyn and Coolidge ambled off for a stroll by the lake, while Thompson and Khan headed toward the Greenhouses. Regulus found himself heading back to the castle alongside Potter.

“You alright, Black?” Potter’s voice was soft, laced with genuine concern.

Regulus rolled his eyes, though he didn’t quite manage to suppress a small smile. “I’m fine, Potter.”

He wasn’t really ‘fine’ though – tired, shaken, confused, relieved that it was over, maybe… For now, he just wanted to get back to the dorm and let it all pass.

“Good. We made a pretty decent team out there, didn’t we?”

Their eyes met, and Regulus felt a strange warmth in his chest that he very pointedly chose to ignore. “Yeah. I suppose we did.”

They walked on in comfortable silence, their footsteps echoing through the corridors as they approached the Entrance Hall. Potter would soon be heading up to Gryffindor Tower, and Regulus down to the Slytherin dungeons.

Just before they parted ways, Potter hesitated. “See you tomorrow?”

Regulus tilted his head, meeting Potter’s warm, mischievous gaze.

He nodded, feeling his throat tighten.

Potter grinned, biting his lip thoughtfully — a gesture that made Regulus’s pulse quicken to a dangerous rhythm. “Save me a dance, will you, Black?”

With a playful wink, Potter turned and bounded up the stairs, leaving Regulus standing there in the Entrance Hall, his heart pounding, his throat dry.

Chapter 25: Of Balls & Champions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Strangely enough, the weekend of the Ball – and thus his final hours at Hogwarts – reflected Regulus's fourth year in an odd, almost miniature way; it was so striking that if, last summer, he had gotten a glimpse at that weekend alone, it would have shown him what the remainder of the year had in store for him.

Not that he'd have believed any of it, because *what* a bloody bizarre year it had been.

On Saturday evening, just after dinner, Regulus was alone in the dormitory – the rest of the group was already drinking in the common room, and as he had no interest in becoming part of Dolohov and Lestrange's mission to get younger students plastered before the Ball evan began, he busied himself with his attire, deliberately drawing out the process.

He had just pulled on his dress trousers and was halfway through putting on his undershirt when he recognised Isa's tread as she burst into the room. She stopped short at the sight of him still in the middle of getting dressed.

"Oh," she said, a little cautiously, "sorry — do you want me to leave?"

Regulus rolled his eyes as he slipped his arms through the undershirt. "No need. Nothing you haven't seen before."

He quickly shook off the memory of Isa embracing his almost naked body the night of the rehearsal dinner, and returned to his clothes.

In the mirror, he adjusted his shirt and caught sight of Isa behind him in the reflection. She was wearing a deep green dress and had put her hair in a simple updo. She looked beyond stunning.

Regulus slowly let his gaze travel over her.

He smirked.

"Merlin – Davies is going to *faint.*"

Isa rolled her eyes, though a blush crept over her cheeks. “Not like I could go officially with him anyway,” she said, then shifted uncomfortably, fidgeting with her earrings — small, intricate pieces that glimmered against her neck. “You think it’s too much? I should drop the earrings, shouldn’t I? It’s overdoing it—”

“You like the earrings, Nott?” Regulus interrupted with a sigh. She was *such* a girl.

“Yes, obviously–”

“Then keep them in.” He shrugged at her puzzled expression. “You could be wearing a House Elf’s tea towel and still be ‘too much’ for Hogwarts standards.”

Isa rolled her eyes, but a small smile tugged at her lips. “Honestly,” she said, shaking her head, “how you haven’t courted a girl yet is a bloody mystery to me.”

Regulus didn’t know whether to laugh or wince as his mind flickered, unbidden, to the one person he had “courted” in his life. What a plot twist *that* was.

He decided not to respond and instead turned to the closet, extracting his waistcoat.

He managed to get one arm through a sleeve, but the fabric twisted awkwardly around his back. Isa noticed his struggle and stepped forward.

“Here, let me help,” she said, moving closer and reaching for the waistcoat. She untangled the fabric and slipped it over his other shoulder, her hands brushing lightly against his back as she adjusted the fit. Her fingers were warm, and Regulus suddenly became intensely aware of her presence. He saw Isa’s gaze drift to the small patch of bare skin just above the edge of his undershirt, barely visible.

Regulus felt his breath hitch as he froze, rooted to the spot.

Slowly, she pulled the fabric back a little more, her eyes catching on the scars laced across his back. Her hand paused there, almost reverent, before her fingertips traced one of the lines gently, following its straight path.

“They don’t fade, do they?” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Regulus's throat felt tight. His grey eyes met Isa's warm, concerned gaze, her expression a blend of sadness and understanding. He shook his head. "No," he said, his voice quieter than he intended. "They don't."

Her fingers traced another scar, lingering for a moment longer, as if memorising it. A long silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken words.

You're broken, Regulus, you're torn, damaged, defiled.

Suddenly, the door flew open with a loud clatter, marking the entrance of Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery and Severus. Regulus and Isa, still caught in the moment, didn't have time to move apart, leaving the boys to take in the scene; Isa standing close behind Regulus, her breath warm on his neck, her hand resting on his back, their eyes locked.

The reactions were mixed — Mulciber and Avery whistled and smirked, Barty's grin turned wicked, Evan looked almost apologetic, and Severus stood there looking utterly uncomfortable.

"Oh, we must be interrupting something," Mulciber drawled, his grin widening as he took in the scene. "Going for a quick one before the Ball?"

Isa's eyes narrowed slightly, and with an air of unruffled poise, she crossed the room and seated herself on Regulus's bed, a faint smirk on her lips. She glanced over at Mulciber, her tone cool but laced with a subtle edge.

"Quick?" she echoed, her brow arched. "Oh, no, Mulciber – we're dignified people. We prefer to enjoy ourselves properly — when we 'go for one', we go for one all night."

Mulciber's smirk faltered as the other boys erupted in laughter, some nudging him as Isa sat, poised and unbothered, leaving him without a retort. Regulus groaned in despair and quickly shrugged on his waistcoat and robes, trying to hide the heat in his face. Still, when he took in the sight of Isa's satisfied smirk, he couldn't help but laugh too.

The boys settled onto various spots around the room – Barty sprawled on his bed, Avery took a chair, and Snape quietly claimed a spot on the windowsill. Barty, holding a bottle of Firewhiskey, took a large gulp and was about to pass it to Evan when Isa suddenly summoned it

with a flick of her wand.

“Honestly, Crouch,” she said with mock irritation, taking a large sip herself. “What happened to courtesy and ‘ladies first’?”

The other boys whistled and laughed uproariously as Isa set down the bottle. Just then, Amaryllis and Melania slipped into the room, taking in the lively scene.

“Ah, Isa’s clearly warming up for the holidays,” Amaryllis remarked dryly, settling onto Regulus’s bed next to Isa, making Regulus find himself a bit displaced, awkwardly glancing around for a seat until he chose the vacant spot beside Severus in the window.

“So, where are you lot spending the break?” Evan asked, passing the bottle around.

“Syria – Damascus,” Isa replied with a faint grimace that made her opinion on the matter very clear.

“London and Germany,” Barty chimed in, referring to his stays at home and with family in Munich.

“Home and Tuscany,” said Amaryllis.

“Same here,” Melania added with a smirk. “We’re hoping to synchronise our stays.”

The group turned toward Severus, who looked uncomfortable under their gaze. He shifted slightly. “London,” he said, before falling silent. Regulus felt for the bloke’s discomfort and intervened quickly.

“I’ll be in London, too,” he chimed in.

They sat together for a while, talking about the closing year at Hogwarts and upcoming holidays, until it was time to head to the Great Hall. Regulus was about to follow when Isa grabbed his arm, gesturing for him to stay behind.

“We’ll be just a minute,” Isa said to the others, shooting an irritated glare at the boys when they made a few suggestive sounds.

Once the door closed, Regulus shifted uneasily, worried Isa might bring up the earlier incident — the scars, or perhaps something else related and uncomfortable.

So, the real reason came as a surprise.

“What’s up?” Regulus asked.

“Look – I’m not sure whether you’ve corresponded with your mother…”

“Not as of late,” Regulus said, raising his eyebrows. What was she getting at?

“Alright, so – apparently our mothers *have* ,” she nodded, visibly uncomfortable. “And well –”

“Spill it out, Nott,” Regulus said impatiently.

She exhaled. “You’re expected to spend part of the holidays… with me.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows. “With you?”

She nodded. “Yes – it’s apparently ‘sensible’ and ‘sends a message’ –”

“To *whom*?”

“No bloody clue – but yes – so, in Damascus…”

Regulus shrugged. Naturally, he didn’t mind spending part of the holidays with his best friend – and with Sirius gone and Cissy married, he’d likely spend much of the time alone anyway.

“Though, um, my dad will be there too,” she added, and he understood.

Ah. That was the tricky part.

“Alright,” he said, trying to meet her gaze, but she looked away, as if reluctant to make a request she hoped he’d fulfil without needing to ask.

He sort of got it – there was something uneasy about spending a long time under the roof of Magnus Alaric Nott; not that he was mean or unwelcoming – on the contrary, if you were on his good side, he was very kind and charming, but there was generally something unsettling about him – as if he could see right through you in second. Which he probably could, as he was excellent at Occlumency.

“It’s fine, Ies,” Regulus said, taking her wrists gently, almost compelling her to meet his gaze. “If that’s what’s expected, I’ll do it.”

Isa gave him a look that was both grateful and apologetic.

“Damascus, then,” Regulus sighed as they left the dorm, rejoining their friends who waited. He shot Isa a teasing smirk. “Syria with Magnus Alaric Nott — someone kill me now.”

Isa smacked his arm, laughing.

Up ahead, Barty and Evan led the group, grinning and joking as they hooked arms in an exaggerated, theatrical fashion, stumbling playfully down the corridor. Mulciber, Avery, and Snape followed, engaged in a lively debate just behind them. And just ahead of Regulus, Melania, Isa, and Amaryllis walked arm-in-arm, sharing gossip and some jokes that had Isa howling with laughter.

Regulus trailed a little behind, watching his friends with a feeling of contentment – the year was over, the unity project done, and tonight would undoubtedly be fun, so he entered the Great Hall actually excited.

*****

Now, Regulus had to admit – although he didn’t completely — that part of his excitement also stemmed from the prospect of seeing James Potter in formal dress robes.

That afternoon, he’d finally been able to face what had been, in hindsight, the case for quite some time: he fancied James Potter. It was a sharp, undeniable realisation, and with it came a singular path forward: he had to distance himself from Potter entirely. It was simple, really; a crush either grew – by feeding it – or it withered – by starving it. And well, it was Potter’s smirk, the twinkling of his eyes, his gentle hands and that damnable habit of biting his lip that fed it.

So, the only way out was to starve it.

It was a good thing, then, that they would be separated for weeks, and that afterwards, they would have no reason to see each other anymore, since the Unity Project would have come to an end.

Because he couldn’t – there was simply no way he could fancy Jamer Potter. Now, he couldn’t be … *that* in the first place – it was unthinkable enough – but somehow it being *James Potter* made it worse, as if the weight of it being *him* left no room for the severity of possible being… that. At least so far, Regulus had been too preoccupied with the person itself that he hadn’t even started

unpacking what being … *that* meant anyway.

He had no idea what it was all supposed to mean. He had no idea what he had to do. There was no bloody blueprint for this and there was no one to ask.

So, first things first – distance. Starve the crush. Then starve the bigger problem.

As they entered the Great Hall, it was clear they were slightly late, although not *too* late, for it clearly hadn't officially been opened yet. Students already clustered in animated groups, laughter ringing out against the lively backdrop. The Hall itself was transformed: blue, yellow, green, and red ribbons twined around enchanted chandeliers, casting soft, glimmering light over tables adorned with sprays of flowers in house colours. Above, the enchanted ceiling sparkled with stars that pulsed in time to the music, wrapping the room in a soft, magical glow.

Instantly, instinctively, Regulus's gaze swept over the crowd – groups of friends chatting over drinks, teachers positioned at the edges, a handful of Ravenclaw Quidditch players discussing some plot… Then there was Coolidge in conversation with Selwyn, Dolohov and Lestrange laughing with some seventh-year girls, then the red-haired Mudblood talking to that Pettigrew bloke – which meant, which would surely mean…

His pulse spiked at the sight.

Across the room stood Potter, deep in conversation with Baiss, his stance relaxed, confident. Even from a distance, Regulus could see the ease in his movements, his expressive hands, the way he leaned forward, fully engaged. And then, as if sensing his gaze, Potter looked up, eyes catching Regulus's across the room. Regulus's breath hitched, his heart beating faster.

Fuck, it should be a crime to look that handsome.

Potter wore deep crimson robes, perfectly offsetting the crisp white of his shirt. Naturally, his hair was as unruly as ever – but it did exactly what it had to do; drawing attention to the strong, defined lines of his jaw. His eyes gleamed with mischief as he unabashedly looked Regulus over, his gaze lingering for just a beat too long. Then, in one smooth, maddening gesture, Potter bit his lower lip.

Oh, this would be the fucking forced starvation of the century.

Swallowing, Regulus quickly turned to Isa, who, thankfully, had eyes only for Davies and thus hadn't witnessed the exchange between Regulus and Potter.

"No matter what happens," Regulus said, "Make sure I don't drink tonight – not a single drop."

*****

Regulus deliberately stayed away from Potter as far as possible, taking a corner of the Great Hall with his fellow Slytherins.

The room thrummed with energy and anticipation — after all, it was the last weekend at Hogwarts; no exams, no classes loomed over them, only the final celebration and, for the 'champions', it was exciting to finally get to know who the Unity Project winners were. Students were scattered across the hall, dancing and laughing; Mulciber tried to down his drink – levitated by his wand – in Avery's mouth but thoroughly missed, leaving everyone howling with laughter. Barty and Evan were slow-dancing dramatically, dipping each other with exaggerated flair whenever a particularly ridiculous song began, while Isa, Amaryllis, and Melania moved with practised ease through some choreographed dance, drawing admiring looks from the crowd.

Regulus leaned against the wall, half-smiling as he took in the scene, but his eyes avoided the right side of the hall, where the Gryffindors gathered. He could practically feel a pair of eyes fixed on him from that direction every now and then, so he decided to keep his gaze stubbornly somewhere else.

Then, suddenly, the music faded out, and a hush settled over the hall as Professor Dumbledore stepped forward. In his deep burgundy robes, he appeared almost regal, his half-moon spectacles catching the light, and his gaze sweeping over the students with unmistakable pride. The students quieted, each one turning toward him with eager expressions, some nudging each other in excited anticipation.

"Good evening, students, staff, and champions," Dumbledore began, his voice filling the hall with its usual, calming resonance. "Tonight, we celebrate the conclusion of our Unity Project — a year that has been as challenging as it has been inspiring. I want to thank all the students, particularly our champions, who took part in this endeavour. You have all contributed to something greater than a contest: unity across the houses, forged through trials, teamwork, and perhaps," he added with a chuckle, "a bit of chaos."

A bit of chaos. Regulus thought of Isa and Davies, of him and Potter… If Dumbledore even knew…

Dumbledore continued, “I commend each of you for your dedication. You have shown that true strength lies not in rivalry, but in the alliances we build and in the courage to overcome our differences.”

Regulus folded his arms, only half-listening as he scanned the room, his gaze wandering across the crowd — until his eyes landed, almost accidentally, on the Gryffindor corner. There stood Potter, back half-turned, smirking as he shared some joke with Sirius. A pang of mixed emotions rose in Regulus’s chest — *saudade* , that ache of missing his elder brother, tangled up with a thread of resentment, and even jealousy – although he couldn’t really place it… He quickly pushed the feeling down and glanced around, curious for a moment about Lupin, the werewolf prefect, but found no trace of him among the Gryffindors.

Dumbledore’s voice turned more playful, breaking into Regulus’s thoughts and drawing his attention back to the podium. “And now,” Dumbledore intoned, “I know many of you have been waiting for this — the winners of the Unity Project.”

A suspenseful hush fell over the hall. Students leaned forward on their feet, breath held in collective anticipation. Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled as he surveyed them all, lingering in the moment before he laughed softly. “The winners will be announced soon,” he said with a grin, “along with the prize, which we’ve kept under wraps until now.”

An exasperated groan sounded beside him. “Complete nutter, isn’t he?” Isa complained with an irritated eye-roll. “Puts us through a year of near-bloody disaster, and we don’t even know what we’re competing for.”

“Perhaps he’s still trying to come up with a prize,” Regulus answered – he actually wouldn’t put it past him.

Then, Dumbledore continued. “First,” he said, his tone shifting to one of intrigue, “there’s another announcement I think you’ll find… interesting.”

The crowd murmured with renewed curiosity, leaning in even closer.

“Taking into account the success of the Unity Project here at Hogwarts, I am delighted to announce that next year, we will take this project to a new level… a truly *international* level.”

Dumbledore paused, letting the weight of his words settle over them, and Regulus saw jaws drop and eyes widen in shock.

“Starting next term, there will be no ordinary Quidditch season here at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore continued, his voice carrying a thrill that sent whispers flying through the hall. “Instead, Hogwarts will host a special tournament, one that will bring together not just our houses, but the very best from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic and Durmstrang Institute!”

The hall erupted in a mixture of gasps and excited chatter. Students turned to each other, their faces alight with amazement, as the news rippled through the crowd like wildfire. Even Regulus felt a shiver of excitement at the prospect of an international Quidditch tournament; the atmosphere in the hall seemed to pulse with anticipation.

Dumbledore waited a moment, letting the excitement simmer, before he added, smiling, “Yes, I thought you might find it thrilling. The Hogwarts team’s Captain will receive instructions during the holidays, and in the first week of next term, there will be tryouts. I’m certain that Hogwarts will assemble a team to make us proud.”

The headmaster’s warm voice rose one last time, a concluding remark as he swept his arms wide. “And now, my friends, let us celebrate the spirit of unity that has brought us here tonight. Music, laughter, and friendship await — may you dance to your heart’s content!”

With a wave of his wand, the music resumed, filling the hall with lively tunes and drawing students back to the dance floor, while whispers about the Quidditch Tournament filled the air, now the talk of every group.

Regulus stood still for a moment, absorbing Dumbledore’s announcement. An international tournament – meeting other students… He could try-out for the team… Absent-mindedly, Regulus’s gaze drifted across the hall, coming to a stop at the sight of Davies.

Now, Regulus didn’t particularly like Davies – the meetings in preparation for the Ball hadn’t really improved and they were stuck in some weird passive-aggressive stand-off, but Regulus had to admit he felt for him. Isa looked positively beautiful and she was radiating a lively energy that made her stand out against the rest; her hair caught the light as she moved, her face alight with laughter, her arms flailing in a dance that was equally terrible and endearing. It was so magnetic

that she'd even managed to convince Regulus to join her for a dance or two – and well, that was saying something, seeing his reluctance to dance, especially in public. However, everytime he wasn't forced onto the dancefloor and instead leaned against the wall with a drink, he spotted Davies – clearly trying to enjoy himself but well, with an undeniable wistfulness in the way he watched his secret girlfriend from across the room.

Perhaps if Davies had been watching her with a possessive, jealous gaze, Regulus wouldn't have cared. But instead, there was something in his look that was almost tender – as if he could appreciate Isa's joy for its own sake, despite not being able to share in it. It was clear he wanted her to enjoy herself — to be as carefree as she was now — even if it left him aching on the sidelines.

And with that, Regulus actually felt himself sympathising with the poor bloke.

So, when Regulus found himself on the dance floor with Isa again, dancing to the familiar strumming of a Hobgoblins' song, he managed to pull Isa further to the centre of the dancefloor. They danced a bit and then, just as the song melted into something ridiculously cheesy, he spun Isa one last time before subtly slipping left, weaving himself between Davies and a chattering sixth-year Ravenclaw. And then – with a casual nudge, he edged Davies right into Isa's path.

Isa and Davies both looked startled as Regulus quickly sidestepped the sixth-year Ravenclaw's attempt to grab his hand, muttering something and ducking past her. Just as he was to turn away from the dancefloor, he caught Isa's signature eyeroll, although it was laced with gratitude.

Regulus smirked.

*****

As the evening wore on, Regulus had to admit that, for the most part, everything was going according to plan. Sure – Isa had gone off somewhere with Davies, likely doing Merlin knew what, and Melania and Evan were probably up to the same, and Mulciber, Avery, and Barty had become increasingly rowdy — Barty had already snogged two girls, Mulciber had knocked back one too many glasses, and Snape had quietly slipped away. So, there came a point when Regulus couldn't quite figure out why he was actually still there. Still, the winners of the contest weren't announced yet and whether he was

winning or not – he was expected to be there, so he could hardly leave.

The success of the evening so far lay in the fact that he had somehow managed to avoid James Potter. He kept to one side of the Great Hall, careful never to get too close or even make eye contact with him. Still, despite his best efforts, Regulus's gaze would drift to Potter every now and then – he seemed to be in his element, laughing and dancing with a few Gryffindor girls that kept trying to drag him to the dancefloor. It shouldn't have come as a surprise to Regulus – Potter was a popular bloke, and there was something magnetic about him. His carefree smirk, the easy way he threw his head back when he laughed, the pranks and banter – all of it. He could hardly blame the girls for shooting admiring glances when Sirius and Baiss hoisted Potter onto their shoulders, dancing him around as he laughed, his eyes bright with joy, entirely unselfconscious, and – frankly – completely irresistible.

But that was all. Apart from these occasional glances, and the desire they stirred in him, Regulus stayed on his side of the room, never exchanging a word with Potter.

That is, until Potter was suddenly behind him. Regulus felt the brush of Potter's breath against his neck, sparking a shiver. "Care for a dance, Black?" Potter's voice was low, playful.

Regulus turned, trying to keep his face impassive. "I don't dance, Potter," he said stiffly.

Potter smirked, leaning in slightly. "Oh, so you snog but you don't dance?"

Regulus's heart raced, but he maintained a careful, stoic expression. "I don't… snog normally," he replied, quiet and measured.

Potter's eyes glinted. "Alright, so I'm special, then?"

Before Regulus could respond – it would've been a very spontaneous, stressed thing anyway for he had no bloody clue what to say – he turned to see Dolohov and Lestrange heading their way, clearly intent on dragging him off to join their latest drinking game. In the brief second it took to turn back, Potter had already slipped into the crowd. Regulus, not eager to become part of the seventh-year Slytherins' drinking antics, quickly turned on his heels too and went for the only way out – the Entrance Hall. In an attempt to dodge a romantic couple or two, he slipped away to the small antechamber. He just needed to

shake off this feeling and then he'd be ready to get back to the Great Hall, then they'd undoubtedly announce the winners and he could go back to the dormitory. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, trying to ground himself. Starve it. Starve it.

Bloody Potter with his smirk and his breath against his neck.

Before he could settle, though, Regulus was startled by the sound of footsteps. He looked up to find Potter casually leaning in the doorway, two drinks in hand, his gaze fixed on Regulus with that unmistakable glint of mischief.

Regulus froze, his face impassive and unreadable.

"Here," Potter said, holding the cups up with a grin that was both charming and infuriating. "The non-spiked ones, I promise."

Potter stepped into the room, holding out one of the cups to him. However, Regulus didn't grab take it, thank him or take a sip – what you'd expected someone to do. No, while Regulus's heart raced, his face remained blank – almost fiercely composed, he pushed all rational thoughts — every reason to turn away, every excuse to stay distant — far, far from his mind, lost entirely in the intensity of the moment.

Determinedly, he took a step forward, his gaze unwavering as he, without a word, took both cups from Potter's hands. In one smooth, deliberate motion, he placed them on a small stone ledge nearby. Potter looked at him, visibly confused. And then, without warning — neither to himself nor to Potter — he ignored the furious pounding of his heart, reached up, and seized Potter's face, turning him towards the wall as he pulled him into a kiss.

And it was like an explosion — a burst of want, desire, and fire that spread through him with a ferocity he'd never felt before – the taste of Potter's lips, the feel of his hands threading through his curls, and the weight of Potter's strong body as Regulus pressed him firmly against the cold stone wall – it was utter, reckless bliss. It was all he'd ever wanted, everything he'd ever needed but knew he could never have — and yet, here it was, real and burning against him, igniting every nerve.

He never wanted it to end – Potter's breath came in shuddering gasps against his lips, his warm fingers tracing the skin at Regulus's neck, sending sparks that made him cling tighter, body pressed flush against Potter's, locking him in a fierce hold of unspoken longing. It was

intoxicating, this moment of vulnerability, of desire stripped bare.

And then, suddenly, Regulus was dragged back down to earth from Muggle heaven – reality settled like a shock when he was reminded what he was doing – with *whom* – *where*…

They stood there, both panting, hair dishevelled and faces flushed – the intense silence broken only by the sound of their ragged breathing. Regulus swallowed hard, feeling the electric pulse of desire still coursing through him, leaving him dizzy and reeling.

Potter ran a shaky hand over his face, staring at Regulus with a raw, disarming vulnerability that nearly undid him all over again. His gaze was a mixture of frustration, hope, and something more — something intense and unspoken, as if pleading with him to see it.

"*Fuck, Black,* " Potter whispered, his voice thick with emotion, "you're killing me…"

Regulus swallowed again. "I'm sorry – I – I shouldn't have – we can't do this." He shook his head, his voice growing more resolute. "We can't do this."

And with that, Regulus turned on his heels and left the room.

*****

The encounter left Regulus shivering for the rest of the night – he did his best to lose himself in his friends' banter, to dance with Isa once she'd returned, and to laugh at Barty's ridiculous moves as he and Evan made exaggerated twirls, but it all felt distant and unreal — as if he had just stepped out of the only real thing in his life and into a hollow imitation.

It grew worse as the evening wore on. Standing alone at the edge of the dance floor, Regulus glanced across the room, taking in the couples spinning under the warm glow of floating candles and the laughter rising in waves, none of which he really took in.

And then – he felt the presence beside him before he looked. A familiar sense of weight, a familiar rhythm of movement and breath.

His brother.

Regulus felt a rush of conflicted emotions – a pang of envy, the odd ache of a weird form of homesickness, and something he couldn't

place. He didn't let it show, though – keeping his gaze on the crowd, he didn't openly acknowledge Sirius's presence and instead let the brittle yet oddly comforting silence stretch between them.

It was Sirius who broke it.

"So, how's the throne, brother?"

"Comfortable," Regulus replied stiffly. "How's the creaky sofa?"

He could actually *hear* Sirius smirk. "Oh, don't worry about me, Regulus. Euphemia Potter's got furniture that could put a royal throne to shame. Real luxury — beats sitting up straight all day."

Before Regulus could respond, they were joined by Isa and Potter – their expressions clearly wary at the sight of the Black brothers standing together. Isa glanced between them with an uneasy look, Davies trailing a step behind. In the thick silence, Sirius's gaze shifted to Isa, his expression flickering between faint approval and something harder to read.

"Well," he said, eyeing Isa with a slow grin, "at least something good has come from that world. Seeing you two together almost makes me believe there's any real love to be found in it after all."

Regulus choked, barely suppressing a laugh at Isa and Davies spluttering into their drinks, while Potter looked away, decidedly uncomfortable.

Oh, if only Sirius knew…

Just then, Dumbledore's voice rang out over the hall as the music died down, saving Regulus from whatever the hell it was that was unfolding around him.

"Finally," Dumbledore's voice was firm yet cheerful, "the moment has come to announce our winners." The Headmaster gave a cheerful smile, his eyes twinkling as he waited for the students to steer their unwavering attention to him.

He first reminded the crowd of the 'champions' – six groups of six students, mixed access houses and years, 'crossing arbitrary division'.

"In recognition of your efforts, each champion will receive a reward of ten Galleons — a modest token, I know, but enough to cover a few prized items, perhaps a book or a box of chocolate frogs for next

term."

Dumbledore held a slight pause, savouring the suspense as he looked out over the crowd.

"However, there is also another prize for the winning group – now, fate had it that as we had finally finalised all the technicalities regarding the prize, it appeared that there was a shared first place." He paused again, clearly enjoying the captivated silence. "The first winning group is group four – consisting of Ms. Flint, Ms. Silvermire. Ms. McKinnon. Mr. Carter, Mr. Bones and Mr. Ashe!"

With a grin, he gestured to the students, prompting applause as they awkwardly ascended the podium. Regulus recognised Violetta Flint, the fifth-year Slytherin and Claire Silvermire, the Chaser on their team, the Hufflepuff Seeker Bones and a friend with whom Potter had shared several dances tonight, Marlene McKinnon, as they stepped onto the podium, clearly embarrassed to be displayed in front of the entire school.

"And now," Dumbledore resumed, "the second winning team…" The Headmaster paused while Regulus looked at the tense faces of Isa and Potter "…Group Five, comprised of Ms. Thompson, Ms. Khan, Ms. Selwyn, Mr. Coolidge, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Black."

Regulus sighed in exasperation as he was forced by the crowd to go up the stage with his group. He caught sight of his friends below, some smirking and nudging each other, while Avery shouted with a broad grin, "No flop with Black on top!"

Regulus groaned internally. How bloody embarrassing was this?

With a gentle cough, Dumbledore drew their attention back to the real prize. "This year, our winners will embark on an exchange program — a truly unique opportunity." He smiled, watching their faces with quiet amusement as he continued. "Starting next term, Group Four will travel to Durmstrang Institute, while Group Five…" His eyes twinkled as he looked toward Regulus's group, "...will join Beauxbatons Academy from the beginning of the school year until Christmas."

The announcement settled over him like a heavy spell.

So *this* was what Professor Thorne meant with 'a touch of the French'.

And *this* is what the Professor had meant when, all that time ago in

the Black Manor's Drawing Room, he had told Regulus to especially keep French in mind – because *'it may prove useful sooner than you think*'.

And then, only as the words sank in the full impact, it struck.

He'd be spending the next term in France.

Frozen in shock, Regulus glanced at his friends in the crowd, then at his group on stage. His eyes drifted to Potter, whose face wore a mix of shock and something close to pure delight, his smirk unmistakable as the truth hit them both.

Not just France.

France – with *Potter*.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, only the epilogue left...

Chapter 26: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was strange, unsettling even, to be back at Grimmauld Place.

Everything was exactly as it had always been, yet somehow, everything felt different. Looking through a new lens, through eyes he hadn't known he'd had – whatever the description, he felt estranged. Every part of the house was the same, nothing had changed – the same creaking floorboards, the same frayed cushion in the drawing room, the same splintered door knob on his closet – Regulus knew every inch of this house, could summon each detail to mind as if it were etched there. And yet, when he stepped out of the fireplace at the start of the summer holidays, it all felt completely foreign.

That night's dinner might have been one of the weirdest dinners he had ever endured, and that was saying something considering the dinner parties he had attended in his life. It was eerily quiet without Sirius's defiant voice filling the space. Sure, dinner had always been a stressful affair with his brother around, but at least it had been predictable; Mother and Sirius shouting at each other, Father either zoning out or, when things got particularly nasty, joining the fray, and Regulus doing his best to calm everyone down.

It was strange – strange that Regulus almost longed for the tense meals, filled with biting comments, underhanded insults and the constant unease that kept him on his toes.

After dinner, Regulus climbed the stairs to his bedroom with a pace very much reflecting his reluctance to spend the first week of the holidays here; it was to be expected that without Sirius – the oldest, the one meant to lead – there was a void, and that filling that void would be an awkward affair in the beginning. But the prospect of having to go through that process, to sit through this stage in which no one knew quite how to act, no clear roles to take until a new balance could be struck – well, he'd even prefer to stay at Uncle Alphard's and ride his ridiculous horses, or to stay under the roof of Magnus Alaric Nott.

Reaching his bedroom, Regulus changed into his pyjamas and was about to grab his book from his trunk, when his eyes fell on his bed's

headboard. Two small, barely visible stars were scratched into the wood, the sight of which took Regulus back to the night they were made.

It was a damp, drizzly night. Regulus and Sirius had been running wild through the muddy garden before Mother called them inside. Carelessly, Regulus had trailed dirt up the stairs and all through the hall, leaving a path of evidence that would be impossible to hide.

Oh no.

Regulus panicked, tugging on Sirius's sleeve.

"Mother will be furious," he whispered, dread already sinking in.

Sirius looked concerned for a second, but then his face broke into a determined grin. "We'll tell her it was me. She won't be as mad if she thinks I did it."

Before Regulus could protest, he heard their mother's footsteps. Her expression, livid as she inspected the mud splattered across her pristine floors, made Regulus's stomach twist.

When she reached his room, she started in on him, her voice cutting like ice.

Sirius immediately spoke up. "It was me, Mother. I'm sorry – I tracked in the mud. I was the one running in the garden."

But, naturally, she wasn't fooled; her sharp eyes darted between them, sizing up the footprints with a sneer.

"I can see whose shoes made this mess. Both of you, lying to my face! You'll stay in your rooms until I decide you're ready to act like proper sons of the Black family."

She gave them one last withering look before snatching Sirius by the arm to drag him to his own room. Just before they disappeared through the door, Sirius shot Regulus a knowing look. Regulus, trembling with fear, nodded back.

As darkness fell and the silence deepened, Regulus had lain alone, staring at the ceiling, feeling as if every shadow in the room was closing in on him. He wasn't sure how long he'd been awake when he heard his door creak open, and felt the bed dip. Turning, he saw Sirius crawling in beside him, wearing that reckless grin.

“You’ll get in trouble if she finds you here,” Regulus whispered, anxious but relieved.

Sirius shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. It’s nicer this way. I know you’re scared of the dark.” He wrapped an arm around Regulus and held him close, his warmth calming Regulus’s fear in an instant.

Then, from his pocket, Sirius pulled a small penknife — undoubtedly stolen from Father’s study. Regulus’s eyes widened at the sight of it, imagining the trouble his brother would be in if Mother found out. But before he could say a word, he was mesmerised by what his brother was doing: Sirius was carefully carving two small stars into the bedframe.

“When you’re afraid,” he’d whispered, “look at these stars. You see? This one is me, Sirius, and this one is you, Regulus. Just like we’re always there in the sky, we’ll always be together here.”

The two of them had fallen asleep like that, with Regulus clutching his brother’s shirt, their matching stars glinting faintly in the moonlight.

Now, years later, Regulus traced the stars with his fingertips, feeling the rough scratches. His chest tightened, the loss of his brother suddenly more palpable, the absence sharper in the silent house. He sighed, propping his pillow against the headboard to block the stars from sight — it didn’t matter anymore. Too much had happened, too many words both spoken and left unsaid. Now, the stars were nothing more than faint scratches, the work of childish hands – nothing more than the reminder of a promise long broken.

*****

Two days and many more uncomfortable meals later, Regulus stood in front of his mirror, adjusting the collar of his robes carefully. He had chosen a set that struck the perfect balance – polished enough to make an impression, yet comfortable enough to keep his nerves steady. The last time he had stood here, it was before that meeting during the Christmas holidays — the one where Sirius had come crashing in, marking the end of their brotherhood as they had known it and the start of Regulus’s place alone in the family’s succession. He could still picture his brother’s eyes, playful and defiant, gleaming with mischief as they had discussed Regulus going on a supposed date with Isa.

And here he was again – same robes, same mirror, preparing for yet another meeting — likely with the same people as back then, or perhaps even more. A strange knot of nerves tightened in his chest as he thought about it, though he was relieved that this meeting

wouldn't be held at Bellatrix's house, but at Malfoy Manor.

He smoothed his robes one last time, picturing the people who would be there. Bellatrix, of course, electric and fierce; Lucius, as calm and calculating as ever; and Cissy, gracious and warm. He took a breath to steady himself, his thoughts spiralling into a mix of anticipation and anxiety.

A sudden knock on the door startled him from his thoughts. He turned to see Cissy herself standing in the doorway. She moved swiftly toward him, greeting him with a soft kiss on the cheek, her expression warm but a little tense.

"Cissy," he said with a small smile, puzzled but pleased. Her hands went to his collar, adjusting the line, smoothing the fabric, even brushing a stray curl back from his forehead.

"Have you eaten?" she asked, inspecting his robes with a meticulous eye, her tone almost motherly.

"Yes," Regulus nodded, brow furrowing slightly. He couldn't help a small, amused smile at her fussing over him.

"Good," she said.

They quickly and silently made their way downstairs to the kitchen.

"You know," Regulus said, "I could have made it to the Manor on my own."

Cissy's lips curved into a small, anticipatory smile, though there was a flicker of something else behind her eyes — excitement, perhaps, or a hint of anxiety. Her hand lingered on his shoulder for a moment, and she glanced down as if choosing her words carefully.

"Tonight is a special night, Regulus," she said softly, brushing her fingers over his shoulder and smoothing another stray curl.

Regulus arched an eyebrow – what was she on about? Before he could press further, though, Cissy gave his shoulder a light, reassuring pat and continued, her gaze holding his, steady and intent.

"Tonight, you are going to meet Him."

Chapter End Notes

Here we are - the end! Let me know what you think and whether

you'd like me to write the sequel.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!